

GOSPEL HOPE IN SUFFERING: PATRICK'S LETTER TO THE SOLDIERS OF COROTICUS

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Patrick, an early Christian missionary to Ireland, experienced a heartbreaking situation where a number of newly baptised believers were killed or abducted. In this article we explore his Christ- and Word-centered spirituality in the face of suffering that is revealed in a letter he wrote to the perpetrators, though it was largely written for the benefit of the grieving local Christians.

Background and Setting

Born into a nominally Christian home in western Britain *circa* 389,¹ Patrick was captured by Irish raiders at the age of sixteen and put into slavery somewhere along the west coast of Ireland. During his six-year captivity,² Patrick placed saving faith in Jesus Christ, as an excerpt from his *Confessions* affirms, ‘...after I reached Ireland I used to pasture the flock each day and I used to pray many times a day. More and more did the love of God and my fear of him and faith increase.’³

Not much is known about Patrick's life between his escape from Ireland and his subsequent return as a missionary. At the very least, he began his theological training as well as his studies of the Latin Bible.⁴ It was, most likely, a limited training⁵ since Patrick himself argued that he

¹ For a discussion of the dating of Patrick's life see R.P.C. Hanson, ‘The Mission of Saint Patrick,’ in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (ed. James P Mackey; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), pp. 22–44; Ludwig Bieler, *St. Patrick and the Coming of Christianity*, A History of Irish Catholicism v. 1, 1 (Dublin: Gill, 1967), pp. 8–46.

² Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History*, (Essex, UK: Addison Wesley Longman Limited, 1992), p. 47.

³ *Confessions* 16 [trans. Ludwig Bieler, *The Works of St. Patrick, St. Secundinus: Hymn on St. Patrick* (1953 ed.; repr. New York/Ramsey, New Jersey: Paulist Press, n.d.), p. 25].

⁴ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Nan A. Talese, Doubleday, 1995), p. 107.

⁵ T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 230.

was ‘very badly educated’⁶ and ‘most unlearned.’⁷ His hesitation appears to be honesty mixed with humility, for Dr Michael Haykin notes, ‘In the course of this preparation, he became thoroughly familiar with the Latin Bible, so much so that Christine Mohrmann has described Patrick as “a man *unius libri*” (“a man of one book”).’⁸

His own doubts notwithstanding, Patrick was filled with a missionary passion for God’s glory and gripped by the Great Commission. His call is demonstrated most vividly through a dream in which God told him to return to Ireland for the purpose of evangelising the country.⁹ Patrick’s passion to reach the ends of the earth stands in stark contrast to his contemporaries. ‘There was seemingly no organised, concerted effort made to go out and convert pagans, beyond the confines of the Western Roman Empire...’¹⁰

The results of Patrick’s labour were extensive, and although he was not the first to reach Ireland,¹¹ Patrick was the one who took the gospel ‘even to the remotest parts, where no one lived any further.’¹² He converted ‘large numbers for God’¹³ into the ‘thousands,’¹⁴ and according to Thomas Cahill, Patrick reached the northern and western provinces of Ulster, Meath, and Connacht, leaving only the southern province of Munster for the next generation to evangelise.¹⁵

Furthermore, the Gospel’s effect on the Celtic people was profound. Within Patrick’s lifetime or soon after his death, the slave trade came to a halt, and murder and warfare drastically decreased.¹⁶ One generation later, the essential structure of the Irish Church was in place, and within 100 years, the conversion of Ireland had been largely achieved.¹⁷

⁶ *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus* 1 [trans. R.P.C. Hanson, *The Life and Writings of the Historical Saint Patrick* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), p. 58.

⁷ *Confessions* 1 (trans. Bieler, *Works of St. Patrick*).

⁸ Michael A.G. Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers: Who They Were and How They Shaped the Church* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2011), p. 141.

⁹ Brendan Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity* (London, UK: Constable and Company Limited, 1965), pp. 46–47. See also *Confessions* 23–24.

¹⁰ Máire De Paor, *Patrick, the Pilgrim Apostle of Ireland: Including St. Patrick’s Confessio and Epistola* (New York: Regan Books, 2002), p. 144.

¹¹ Recent scholarship shows that Palladius was the first bishop resident in Ireland, not Patrick. See, for example, Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 182.

¹² Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 215.

¹³ *Letter* 2 (trans. Hanson, *Life and Writings*, p. 60).

¹⁴ Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, p. 143.

¹⁵ Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, p. 110.

¹⁶ Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, pp. 110–114.

¹⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 239–240.

Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus

There are only two authentic documents written by Patrick, the *Confessions* and the *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*,¹⁸ and both were penned in the latter years of his ministry. Because of his legacy in Ireland, a number of legends arose regarding Patrick,¹⁹ as well as a number of pseudographic writings that were eventually attributed to him.²⁰ This paper is concerned only with the *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*.

Setting of the Letter

The *Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus*²¹ is an ‘open letter’ of excommunication against a ruler named Coroticus. His soldiers had abducted some of Patrick’s newly baptised converts; in fact, they were still in their baptismal robes when they were attacked. Though Patrick was not present when the attack came, he must have been nearby. On the next day, Patrick sent a letter to the soldiers demanding the release of their prisoners, and his messenger was mocked, scorned and denied.

In response, Patrick wrote the *Letter* and expresses both anger for those killed in the attack, and sorrow for those sold to the Picts. Nevertheless, mingled with his anger and grief are both joy for the dead, since they are already in the presence of Jesus, and hope for the slaves, since they are citizens of an everlasting kingdom.

Who was Coroticus?²² Current research concludes that Coroticus was a Roman Briton, who was living nearby in Ireland at the time of writing.²³ Traditionally, Coroticus was placed in Britain²⁴ rather than Ireland, because residence in Britain would have made it easy for Coroticus to sell the captives to the Picts. In more recent studies, it has been noted that if

¹⁸ Eoin Macneill, *Saint Patrick* (Dublin: Clonmere and Reynolds, 1964), p. 104.

¹⁹ The most famous one being that he drove all of the snakes out of Ireland.

²⁰ For a thorough treatment of all the literature and stories attributed to Patrick see Alice-Boyd Proudfoot, *Patrick: Sixteen Centuries with Ireland's Patron Saint* (New York: Macmillan, 1983).

²¹ Traditionally known as the *Epistola ad Coroticum*.

²² For further discussion see E.A. Thompson, *Who was Saint Patrick?* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1985), pp. 126–137; E.A. Thompson, ‘St Patrick and Coroticus,’ *Journal of Theological Studies* 31, no. 1 (April 1980): pp. 12–27; David N Dumville, *Saint Patrick, A.D. 493–1993* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1993), pp. 108–115.

²³ Thompson, *Who was Saint Patrick?*, pp. 131–132.

²⁴ Either in Dumbarton or Cardigan.

Coroticus resided in Britain, the *Letter*, as an excommunication, would usurp another Bishop's authority.²⁵ Furthermore, Patrick's command to 'not take food nor drink with them nor must their alms be accepted'²⁶ could not be carried out in any practical manner, since his parishioners would not have had any contact with Coroticus or his soldiers.

Structure of the *Letter*

The *Letter* divides generally into three sections. In the first section (§1–§4), Patrick gives his qualifications, explaining who he is and his missionary call from God (§1). He then provides his reason for writing this 'open letter' (§2–§3). Patrick then completes this first section by giving his opinions and feelings on the situation (§4).

The second section (§5–§14) includes the excommunication along with its implications. Patrick begins this section with the excommunication (§5), and then presents his justification for and authority in the matter (§6). He calls on the community to participate in the excommunication (§7), and offers biblical support for the condemnation (§8–§9). Patrick restates his calling to Ireland (§10), and implies that there has always been opposition to his ministry (§11). The critics he addresses in the middle section may very well be the followers of Coroticus. If so, it means that they had prior contact with the Christian community, and therefore the raiding and kidnapping were premeditated. 'The tone of Patrick's tract leads one to wonder whether the very fact of the converts' baptism made them targets.'²⁷

Patrick briefly speaks directly to the Lord in prayer, and then again addresses his audience (§12), confident that the local Christian community will spontaneously react to these evils by upholding the excommunication (§13). Patrick concludes this section by declaring the actions of Coroticus' soldiers more immoral than even pagan practices. To Patrick, these 'Christian' soldiers of Coroticus were not simply misguided. They were worthy of excommunication because they had become 'citizens of devils, because of their wicked behavior.'²⁸

²⁵ Professor E.A. Thompson has insisted on this single point since 1980. See Dumville, *Saint Patrick*, p. 108.

²⁶ *Letter* 7 (trans. Hanson, p. 64).

²⁷ David N. Dumville, *Saint Patrick, A.D. 493–1993* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell Press, 1993), p. 108.

²⁸ *Letter* 2 (trans. Hanson, p. 58).

The final section (§15–§21) reveals Patrick’s pastoral heart. He grieves for those captured and killed (§15), and even addresses those in captivity with both sorrow and joy (§16–§17). Patrick then reflects on the eternal state of everyone involved: the dead Christians; the captives; and even the captors themselves (§18–19). He concludes his thoughts by declaring them to be nothing less than the words of God (§20), and remarkably, even yearns for Coroticus and his soldiers to repent (§21). ‘Ever compassionate, and always attentive to deeper spiritual truth of a situation, Patrick said he couldn’t decide whether to weep more for those who were killed or enslaved, or for those who did the killing or enslaving. These men were the true slaves, he believed. They had chained themselves to the devil himself, for “whoever commits a sin is a slave of sin.”’²⁹

Suffering and Spirituality in the *Letter*

Writing on the *Letter*, Lesley Whiteside concludes, ‘Written in haste and in anger, it affords little scope for devotional use.’³⁰ Whiteside’s conclusion, however, does not hold up to scrutiny. Patrick’s *Letter* demonstrates the reality of suffering and persecution in a fallen world, and how the believer may find both comfort and purpose based on the promises of the Gospel.³¹

Patrick himself experienced a life filled with distress. According to his *Confessions*, he faced many tribulations and setbacks.³² After his escape from slavery in Ireland, he nearly starved to death,³³ and many years later was captured again for two months.³⁴ Twelve times he faced situations that could have killed him,³⁵ including capture by kings who both wanted him dead, and plundered him for everything of value.³⁶

²⁹ Jonathan Rogers, *Saint Patrick* (Nashville [Tenn.]: Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. 79.

³⁰ Lesley Whiteside, *The Spirituality of St Patrick* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Pub., 1997), p. 12.

³¹ Hanson reflects, ‘It is noteworthy that Patrick “put first in his thought and teaching the great central message of God’s love, God’s act of redemption in Christ, the call to men to respond to this in faith and love, and the presence of the Spirit in the Church no making that love and redemption a reality for those who believe and obey.”’ Hanson, *St. Patrick: His Origins and Career*, p. 203. Quoted in Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, p. 148.

³² *Confessions* 15.

³³ *Confessions* 19.

³⁴ *Confessions* 21.

³⁵ *Confessions* 35.

³⁶ *Confessions* 52.

In his *Letter*, Patrick writes that this suffering is normative for the Christian faith. The Christian community in Ireland was mocked and despised alongside him. He affirms ‘I am despised in some quarters,’³⁷ and an ‘object of resentment,’³⁸ but is not surprised since ‘a prophet is without honor in his own country.’³⁹ As a former slave, Patrick is concerned that the contempt people have toward him will extend to those who are captured.⁴⁰ He is also concerned particularly for the young girls sold as slaves to the Picts. He tells the soldiers ‘You, on the contrary, murder them and sell them to an outlandish race which does not know God. You are virtually handing over the members of Christ to a brothel.’⁴¹ The captives from his congregation were ‘sheep savaged and made a prey,’⁴² and were treated like outsiders.⁴³ While weeping over the condition of the captives, Patrick identifies with them to such a degree that he would call himself Irish rather than a Briton, exclaiming ‘They think it derogatory that we are Irish.’⁴⁴

Because some had been martyred in the attack, Patrick condemns Coroticus and the soldiers with strong words: ‘Bloodthirsty, steeped in blood, the blood of innocent Christians,’⁴⁵ who were ‘ruthlessly massacred and slaughtered.’⁴⁶ They are ‘murderers of fathers and of brothers,’⁴⁷ and have ‘defiled [their] hands with the blood of the children of God,’⁴⁸ and ‘filled their houses with the loot of dead Christians.’⁴⁹ In all of this, Patrick understood that suffering even to the point of death was desired for the sake of Christ, because through death the Christian receives eternal life and Christ’s eternal kingdom.⁵⁰ Patrick’s pastoral reminders to his flock in the *Letter* are thoroughly biblical. It is no surprise, then, that almost every paragraph in this letter appeals to Scripture (§1, §4–§12, §14–§20).

In reference to Acts 13:47, Patrick explains that his motive is the Gospel and the glory of Jesus Christ: ‘I have a part with those whom he

³⁷ *Letter* 1 (trans. Hanson, p. 58). See also *Letter* 12.

³⁸ *Letter* 12 (trans. Hanson, p. 68).

³⁹ *Letter* 11 (trans. Hanson, p. 66).

⁴⁰ Macneill, *Saint Patrick*, p. 107.

⁴¹ *Letter* 14 (trans. Hanson, p. 68).

⁴² *Letter* 12 (trans. Hanson, p. 68).

⁴³ *Letter* 16 (trans. Hanson, p. 70).

⁴⁴ *Letter* 16 (trans. Hanson, p. 70).

⁴⁵ *Letter* 2 (trans. Hanson, p. 60).

⁴⁶ *Letter* 3 (trans. Hanson, p. 60).

⁴⁷ *Letter* 5 (trans. Hanson, p. 62).

⁴⁸ *Letter* 9 (trans. Hanson, p. 66).

⁴⁹ *Letter* 13 (trans. Hanson, p. 68).

⁵⁰ *Letter* 10, (trans. Hanson, p. 66).

called and predestined to proclaim the Gospel among no inconsiderable persecutions even to the end of the earth.⁵¹ He knows his calling will produce fruit and paraphrases Phil 2:16: ‘But again I rejoice within myself; I have not labored in vain nor has my pilgrimage been useless.’⁵² He was willing to abandon all for the sake of Christ as an ‘exile and refugee for the love of God’⁵³ and for the truth of Christ has ‘given up country and kinsfolk and my own life even to death.’⁵⁴ His eloquent summary is found in paragraph 10 of the *Letter*: ‘In short, I am a slave in Christ to an outlandish nation because of the unspeakable glory of eternal life which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

By unpacking this Christ-centered and Word-centered view of spirituality in the context of suffering, it becomes clear to the reader that the audience of the *Letter* was neither Coroticus nor his soldiers. The intended audience was the surrounding community of faith, and his purpose was to reaffirm the priority of the Gospel, especially amidst suffering and martyrdom. Consequently, Patrick closes the *Letter* by reaffirming the hope of the Gospel, and comforting the living with an address to the martyred: ‘Thanks be to God you baptised believers have departed from this world to Paradise. I observe you: you are beginning the journey to where there will be no night nor mourning nor death any more, but you will rejoice like calves loosed from their tethers.’⁵⁵ He continues, ‘You will...reign with apostles and prophets and martyrs. You will receive eternal kingdoms.’⁵⁶ Finally, Patrick concludes with the glorious anticipation of being forever with the Lord Jesus: ‘The good... will feast with great confidence with Christ. They shall judge nations and rule over wicked kings for ever and ever.’⁵⁷

Concluding Reflections

Persecution is a common experience for millions of Christians around the world, and though suffering and persecution is a reality of life in a fallen world, the believer ought to find both comfort and purpose based on the promises of the Gospel. Furthermore, persecution produces solidarity

⁵¹ *Letter* 6 (trans. Hanson, p. 62).

⁵² *Letter* 17 (trans. Hanson, p. 72).

⁵³ *Letter* 1 (trans. Hanson, p. 58).

⁵⁴ *Letter* 1 (trans. Hanson, p. 58).

⁵⁵ *Letter* 17 (trans. Hanson, p. 72).

⁵⁶ *Letter* 18 (trans. Hanson, p. 72).

⁵⁷ *Letter* 19 (trans. Hanson, p. 72).

with the Christian community as they share in the sufferings of Christ (Phil 3:10), and weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15). Thus, Patrick's *Letter* serves to encourage pastoral consolation for sufferers rooted in the Father's own comforting love and compassion (2 Cor 1:3–4) and still serves as a model for the church today, demonstrating that it is normative for the Christian life (Matt 10:16–39) and yet the reward is great (Matt 5:12).

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