

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## "No Reserves. No Retreats. No Regrets."

### THE LIFE STORY OF WILLIAM WHITING BORDEN

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*"Do not put out the Spirit's fire."*

1 Thessalonians 5:19

*"Apart from Christ, there is no explanation for such a life."* Such was said of William Borden<sup>1</sup> by Professor Charles Erdman of Princeton University, and he was not mistaken. It is sad that more Christians are not familiar with the amazing story of this man whose brief life and sudden death touched his generation in a powerful way, and left a testimony of total devotion to Christ that will stand through all generations.



Born in 1887, William Borden grew up a beloved son in one of the wealthiest families of Chicago. His father was a millionaire in the days when very few ever reached such a state, and billionaires didn't exist. Children of the very wealthy are notorious for being spoiled, selfish, and arrogant, but in Borden's case it never happened. The primary reason, through God's providence and grace, was Borden's mother, Mary. When William was seven, his loving and devoted mother experienced Christ in a radical way. She quickly transferred her church membership to the strongly evangelical Moody Church, started studying her Bible, and became determined to pass on her faith to her children.

No doubt her other children were impacted by Momma's walk with Christ, but it was William that seemed to embrace his mother's new faith whole-heartedly. Borden wrote at age 6, "I want to be an honest man when I grow up, and a true and loving and kind and faithful man." Borden surrendered his life to Christ at age 7 as a result of the witness of his mother and never looked back. The young lad seemed spiritually precocious. He read the Bible and prayed with his Mother before going to school. As he made his way through his teenage years there was no adolescent rebellion so typical of teens. He was

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations are from Taylor, Geraldine Guinness (1926). *Borden of Yale* 09. Philadelphia: China Inland Mission.

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about as close to the ideal child as was possible. He got good grades, had a likeable manner, was respectful to his parents, and enjoyed sports.

## The Calling

In 1904, at age 16, William Borden graduated from high school in Chicago. As an heir to his family's fortune, he was already wealthy. For his high school graduation present, Borden's parents gave their 16-year-old son a trip around the world as a "gap-year" gift, hiring a devout Christian young man to travel with him as his companion and guardian. While on this trip William met a number of Christian missionaries. Many of them were young people, idealistic, and enthusiastic in their desire to reach the nations for Christ, and they made a deep impression upon him. It was during this trip that Borden developed a love for people and cultures, and with it a desire to become a missionary. As the young man traveled through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, he felt a growing burden for the world's hurting people. Finally, Borden wrote his mother about his "desire to be a missionary."<sup>2</sup>

"When I look ahead a few years, it seems as though the only thing to do is prepare for the foreign field..." The young heir to the Borden fortune was beginning to sound more like a preacher than a rich kid. Indeed, he has been sometimes referred to as the "millionaire missionary."<sup>3</sup>

One friend expressed disbelief that Bill was "throwing himself away as a missionary." A story often associated with Borden says that, in response, Bill wrote two words in the back of his Bible: "No reserves."

## No Reserves

The phrase "no reserves" indicates Borden's understanding that he was responsible for his own life and accomplishing the mission God had given him—no "reserve" was waiting in the wings to fulfill his life's purpose.

Even though young Borden was wealthy, he arrived on the campus of Yale University in 1905 trying to look like just one more freshman. He engaged in sports and studies, joining the boxing, yacht, and track and field teams. Borden wrote, "Every man in the University must be reached." Very quickly, however, Borden's classmates noticed something unusual about him, and it wasn't that he had lots of money. One of them wrote: "He came to college far ahead, spiritually, of any of us. He had already given his

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Geraldine Guinness (1926). *Borden of Yale '09*. Philadelphia: China Inland Mission, 75.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor (1926), 75.

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heart in full surrender to Christ and had really done it. We who were his classmates learned to lean on him and find in him a strength that was solid as a rock, just because of this settled purpose and consecration."<sup>4</sup>

During his college years, William Borden made an entry in his personal journal that defined what his classmates were seeing in him. That entry said simply: "Say 'no' to self and 'yes' to Jesus every time."<sup>5</sup>

Upon returning home William entered Yale University, where he entered enthusiastically into his studies and the various social activities the bustling campus had to offer.<sup>6</sup> But of greatest interest to William were those events associated with the Christian faith. Yale had been founded as a training center for ministers, but by the early 1900's the new "higher criticism" had made inroads into its evangelical foundations, and many of the students had little use for the evangelical flavor of Christianity that had been essential to Borden and his mother. Borden's first disappointment at Yale came when the university president spoke in a convocation about the students' need to have "a fixed purpose." After that speech, Borden wrote: "He neglected to say what our purpose should be, and where we should get the ability to persevere and the strength to resist temptations."<sup>7</sup> Surveying the Yale faculty and much of the student body, Borden lamented what he saw as the end result of an empty, humanistic philosophy: moral weakness and sin-ruined lives.

He began meeting with a couple of friends for morning prayer and Bible study. Not content with merely satisfying his own need for fellowship and spiritual nourishment, he eagerly sought ways to motivate other students to join the Bible study groups.

During his first semester at Yale, Borden started something that would transform campus life. One of his friends described how it began: "It was well on in the first term when Bill and I began to pray together in the morning before breakfast. I cannot say positively whose suggestion it was, but I feel sure it must have originated with William. We had been meeting only a short time when a third student joined us and, soon after, a fourth. The time was spent in prayer after a brief reading of Scripture. Bill's handling of Scripture was helpful. . . . He would read to us from the Bible, show us something that God had promised, and then proceed to claim the promise with assurance."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor (1926), 98.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor (1926), 122.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2017/february/forgotten-final-resting-place-of-william-borden.html>

<sup>7</sup> Taylor (1926), 90.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor (1926), 97.

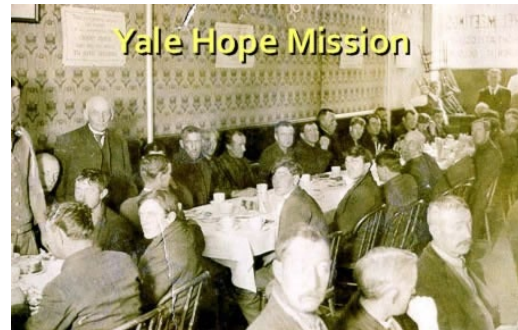
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Borden's small morning prayer group gave birth to a movement that soon spread across the campus. By the end of his first year, 150 freshmen were meeting weekly for Bible study and prayer.

In his sophomore year, Borden organized Bible study groups and divided up the class of 300 or more, each man interested in taking a certain number so that all might, if possible, be reached. The names were gone over one by one, and the question asked, 'Who will take this person?' Borden seemed to thrive on reaching the toughest of the tough. As they were "assigning" students to be reached, sometimes a notoriously ungodly man would be named that nobody was eager to approach. After a lengthy pause revealed everyone's reluctance to attempt such a hard case, Borden would quietly say, "Put that one down for me."<sup>9</sup> Borden made it his habit to seek out the most "incurable" students and try to bring them to salvation. By the time Borden was a senior, one thousand of Yale's 1,300 students were meeting in such groups.

## Minister of Christ

Meanwhile William sought further opportunities for service while at college. He was instrumental in the founding of the Yale Hope Mission in New Haven, an organization which provided food, shelter, and the gospel to the city's down and outers. In one year, 14,000 men attended a gospel meeting, over 17,000 received a warm meal, and 8,000 were given a place to sleep. Borden supported the mission in his spare time. He used money from his family fortune to underwrite the mission's programming, as well as to purchase the building that housed it. The Yale Hope Mission was founded in 1907 and continued until 1968, when the University took over the building. One of William's friends noted that he "might often be found in the lower parts of the city at night, on the street, in a cheap lodging house or some restaurant to which he had taken a poor hungry fellow to feed him, seeking to lead men to Christ." One man came to the mission half drunk but was convicted during the service. He related: "I went forward and kneeled down and Bill came and kneeled down beside me, and he explained as much as he could the power of Jesus Christ, and how it was only Him who could help me. I never drank from that night to this – never felt like it..."<sup>10</sup>



During college, Borden read *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. His father died in 1906, and it was assumed that Borden would go on to run the family business.

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<sup>9</sup> Taylor (1926), 150.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor (1926), 148.

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He, along with his brother, were given access to the family fortune and William now assumed authority to write checks for thousands of dollars according to his own prerogative. Sometimes he would quietly write out a check for a large amount and entirely fund various ministry organizations he was involved with, but at other times he would spend hours praying with friends for needed funds, feeling like it wouldn't be honoring to God for him to simply support all Christ's work apart from prayer and faith. He was now a millionaire in his own right, but he certainly didn't act the part. During conferences he would sometimes don a waiter's apron and serve tables if the need was there. A friend noted, "A kindness he did in New York station is one of the things I have recalled repeatedly. We were going out to take a train when I noticed he had dropped behind, and turning I saw him helping a very poor immigrant woman who was struggling along with many bundles and a baby in her arms." When a much traveled visitor was asked what impressed him most while touring America, he replied, "The sight of that young millionaire kneeling with his arm around a bum in the Yale Hope Mission." One friend wrote, "No one would have known from Borden's life and talk that he was a millionaire, but no one could have helped knowing that he was a Christian..."

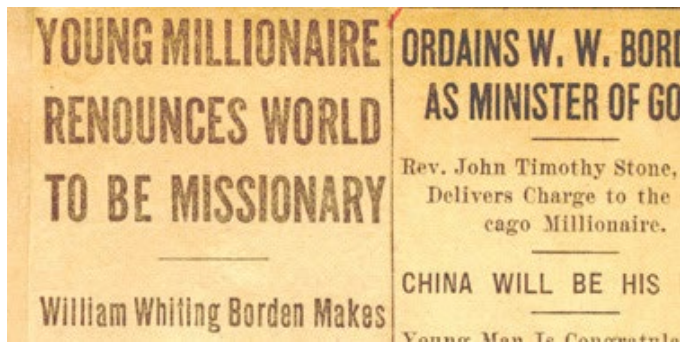
Borden's spiritual strength came from his walk with the Lord, his prayer life, and his commitment to the inerrancy and inspiration of the Scriptures. His was a time when it had become popular to doubt the Bible. Even seminary students and professors were joining with the "higher criticism" movement which suggested that the Bible may contain some beautiful thoughts but it was surely filled with errors and myths, and was not to be taken too literally or seriously. Borden would have none of this. In a letter Borden wrote: "... a broad spirit of tolerance is insisted upon, especially in matters of religion, and any and all are branded as narrow who dare think otherwise. That word "narrow" is one of Satan's deadliest weapons, it seems to me; for most people would apparently rather be shot than be called narrow..."

## The Millionaire Who Wanted to be a Missionary

During his early years at Yale Borden attended a missionary conference that was to change his thinking and his life. One of the speakers, Samuel Zwemer, made a passionate appeal for volunteers to reach the most unreachable people then on the planet (which is still true today). He spoke in passionate terms of the millions of Muslims who had been almost entirely ignored by the vast majority of missionary endeavors. He spoke of China, which had fifteen million Muslims with not a single missionary among them. He made no attempt to cover the high price that might be demanded, declaring, "Of course it will cost life. It is not an expedition of ease nor a picnic excursion to which we are called..." William Borden was hooked. Ever on the lookout for a challenge he had found a

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challenge of the highest order. He began considering a ministry to the Muslims of northern China.



In one of his notebooks he later wrote: "In every man's heart there is a throne and a cross... If Christ is on the throne self is on the cross... If Jesus is on the throne you will go where He wants you to go..." Borden's missionary call narrowed to the Muslim Kansu people in China. Fixing his eyes on that goal,

Borden never wavered. He also challenged his classmates to consider foreign missionary service. One of them said of him: "He certainly was one of the strongest characters I have ever known, and he put backbone into the rest of us at college. There was real iron in him, and I always felt he was of the stuff martyrs were made of, and heroic missionaries of more modern times."<sup>11</sup>

Although he was a millionaire, Bill seemed to "realize always that he must be about his Father's business, and not wasting time in the pursuit of amusement."<sup>12</sup> Although Borden refused to join a fraternity, "he did more with his classmates in his senior year than ever before." He presided over the huge student missionary conference held at Yale and served as president of the honor society Phi Beta Kappa.

Upon graduation from Yale, Borden turned down some high-paying job offers. It has been reported that Bill Borden wrote two more words in his Bible: "No retreats."

## No Retreats

At the end of his senior year, he didn't return home, and also turned down a number of lucrative job offers. Instead, he went on to do graduate work at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey, where he prepared for a life of ministry and got involved in the Student Volunteer Movement, whose motto was, "the evangelization of the world in this generation." During this time, he became aware of millions of Muslims living in China, with absolutely no access to the Gospel or any Christian witness.

Borden determined he would live among the Muslims of China. It would be a challenging and years-long undertaking. "If ten men are carrying a log," Borden exhorted other students, "nine of them at the little end and one at the heavy end—and you want to

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor (1926), 149.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor (1926), 149.

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help—which end will you lift on?” The phrase “no retreats” indicates Borden’s intent to leave his rich family upbringing and dedicate his life to the mission of Christ in China.

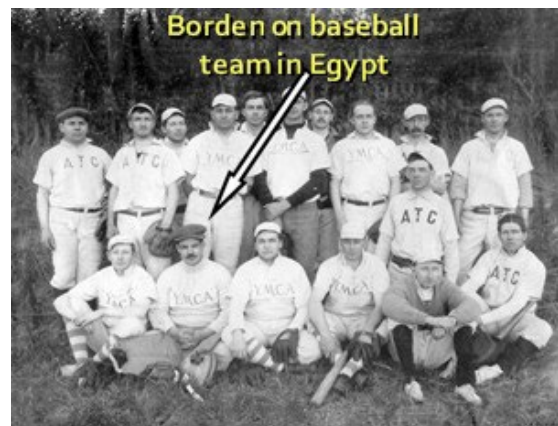
His passion for missionary work among the Chinese never wavered. When a classmate asked him whether he planned to seek a wife any time soon, he replied, “It would be cruel for a man who was going into one of the most difficult of missionary fields to ask any girl to go with him, because the woman always fared the worst, often succumbing (to disease) when the man survived.” Additionally, he felt it would hinder him from peak effectiveness as a missionary.

Upon Borden’s graduation from seminary and ordination the local Chicago newspapers expressed amazement that the young millionaire was planning to enter the life of a lowly missionary in “the darkest and meanest section of the Orient”, and declared it was beyond understanding. With William’s striking good looks, wealth, attractive personality, sharp mind, and natural leadership qualities, he could have married whomever he wanted, succeeded at whatever he attempted, and possessed everything he desired. To people who failed to grasp the love of Christ, he was surely throwing his life away.

## To China!

At last, the time came for William to embark upon his great missionary endeavors. He sailed for China. The story was carried by New York Herald News Service and made the front page of a Sunday edition of *The Pittsburgh Press* newspaper.

Borden’s desire to minister and witness in China required learning Arabic (which many of the Chinese Muslims spoke) and knowledge of Islam effectively reach the Muslim people. On December 17, 1912, he set sail for Cairo, Egypt, for training. The newspapers tracked him. “Millionaire Gives Up All,” printed one Chicago daily. On arrival he moved in with a Syrian family in a neighborhood friendly to both Muslims and Christians. He organized a Scripture distribution campaign for the city of 800,000.



While there he could not content himself with mere academic study. He had hardly been there two weeks when he began to organize the students of the theological school to engage in a city wide, house-to-house canvass where all 800,000 inhabitants of Cairo would be given Christian literature and hear the gospel. Borden took to the streets and

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started handing out evangelistic messages, written in the style of the Koranic teachings, that were popular among the Egyptians.

After just three months of study and evangelism, something happened to William that shocked the world. The passionate young missionary contracted spinal meningitis. He took the prescribed treatments but to no avail. He deteriorated rapidly, and just 19 days later, died. His mother, on her way to visit her son, received word of his passing just hours before her ship docked in Cairo. It is said that upon opening his Bible, friends found a third phrase added sometime during Borden's final days on earth—"No regrets." Though his dreams of living on mission were not fulfilled, he did not bear a grudge against God for how his life ended. His colleagues wrote tracts about his testimony, translating them into Arabic, Persian, and Hindustani. The Chinese version was distributed to 35,000, opening doors for new missions throughout China.

He never reached his beloved China, although in one sense he had been functioning as a "missionary" for years, first at Yale, then at Princeton, and finally in his short stint in Egypt. Borden's death became international headlines. His short life, passion for Jesus and missions, and willingness to risk everything became the predominant sermon illustration whenever preachers talked about evangelism and missions. His life and death inspired countless believers to volunteer for missionary service and to dedicate themselves whole-heartedly to the cause of Christ.

## Oil Poured Out

To some his life seemed a great waste. How pleasant a life he might have had, had he only forgotten this foolish notion of reaching the unreached people for Christ! But most believers chose to embrace the sentiments of another missionary who wrote about Borden: "I have absolutely no feeling of a life cut short. A life abandoned to Christ cannot be cut short. 'Cut short' means not complete, interrupted, and we know that our Master does no half-way jobs..." The reality is that all those who were Borden's peers and contemporaries are now dead. Some may have lived to be eighty or ninety, but they are all gone. Yet how few have made the impact that young William Borden did, as he inspired his generation and the generations to come with a sterling example of a life lived as a flame of fire for the cause of Jesus Christ. When they looked into his Bible they found three powerful phrases written at different times in his life. While he was in school, having made his decision to forsake a comfortable life of wealth and ease in the U. S. he had written, "No reserves." After graduating from Yale, with many offers of important positions coming to him, he wrote, "No retreats." And below these two phrases, written shortly before he died, were the amazing words, "No regrets."



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When the news of William Whiting Borden's death was cabled back to the U.S., the story was carried by nearly every American newspaper. "A wave of sorrow went round the world . . . Borden not only gave (away) his wealth, but himself, in a way so joyous and natural that it (seemed) a privilege rather than a sacrifice," wrote Taylor in her introduction to his biography.<sup>13</sup>

Was Borden's untimely death a waste? Not from God's perspective. As the story has it, prior to his death, Borden had written two more words in the back of his Bible. Underneath the words "No reserves" and "No retreats," he is reported to have written: "No regrets."



Borden's grave has been updated and now includes the famous words attributed to him—"No reserves, no retreats, no regrets."

Photo: Public domain

A statue in Borden's honor is erected in Dwight Hall on the Yale campus, where he held his Bible studies, and where Christian meetings still continue to this day. On hearing of his death, the newsletter of Princeton Seminary declared, "No young man of his age has ever given more to the service of God and humanity!"<sup>14</sup> In 2016, a Yale graduate in Cairo came upon his tomb, which had been neglected. Funds were raised and a new marble plaque was installed, with one addition—the phrases "No reserves, no retreats, no regrets."

<sup>13</sup> Taylor (1926), ix.

<sup>14</sup> <https://yalestandard.com/biographies/bill-borden/>

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## A Final Thought

A long time ago there was a woman who was also considered wasteful. She broke an extremely expensive alabaster box of oil, worth nearly a year's wages, and poured it over the Master's head. When some objected to the "waste" our Lord refused to condemn her, saying that wherever the gospel was preached this woman's act of total devotion would be shared as a memorial to her. William Borden was of the same spirit. The Lord Jesus, who gave His precious life and blood for us, deserves our best.

And it is never a waste when we give it.

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[https://www.spiritofgrace.org/articles/nl\\_2011/william\\_borden.html](https://www.spiritofgrace.org/articles/nl_2011/william_borden.html)

<https://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/regret.htm>

<https://leadadmin.org/articlesarchive/leadership-lessons-from-william-borden>

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