William Whiting Borden 1887-1913



The passion of his life was to reach those least reached with the news of God's love for them. He learned from Samuel Zwemer that no one had gone specifically to share with the Muslims of Gansu Province–North West China. He set his heart to reach these people.

William was born into a family of considerable wealth and influence in Chicago, Illinois on November 1, 1887. His was a devout family. His ancestors were of Puritan stock. From his earliest years he was taught to pray and read the Bible. When he was seven years old his mother, Mary, entered into a new spiritual experience that was to change her life and have a great influence on her son. Soon after this she joined Moody Church where God used the great Bible teacher Dr. R. A. Torrey to lead William to faith in Christ. Later he wrote, "**I am very thankful for the teaching I received at the Moody Church and Institute before I was 15 years old. It kept me firm in my beliefs inspite of opposition and criticism which I was not able to answer**".

At the age of 16 William graduated from The Hill School. As a birthday present, his parents wanted him to travel round the world for a year before enrolling in Yale University. His companion on this trip was Mr. Walter Erdman – a Princeton graduate (later a worker in Korea). They set out from San Francisco in September 1904 on the USS Korea. Their journey took them to the Hawaiian Islands, the Pacific Ocean, Japan, coastal China, Hong Kong, Siam (Thailand), Malaysia, the Straights Settlements (Singapore) and then on to Calcutta and up to the border of Nepal to see the Himalayas. Next came south India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), back to Calcutta then central and northern India before sailing from Bombay for Egypt, Palestine, Asia Minor (Turkey), Greece, Italy, Switzerland and then England before returning to the US in the summer of 1905.

Dr. R. A. Torrey was on a world preaching tour (1902-05). William attended a meeting of his in London on the first Sunday in July 1905 and there went forward to re-dedicate his life to Christ and to His service. Torrey's sermon had five points for daily living that became life goals for William:

- Look always at Jesus
- Keep confessing Jesus everywhere
- Keep studying God's Word Mt. 4:4
- Keep praying everyday 1 Thess. 5:17
- Go to work!

Early in 1905 William had written to his mother, "**I pray every day for all my dear family, I also pray that God will take my life into His hands and use it for the furtherance of His Kingdom as He sees best. I feel sure He will answer my prayer. It strengthens me to know that you are also praying for this.**"

William enrolled at Yale and soon started praying with one other keen Christian student early every morning. Others wanted to join in. Soon there was a network of small prayer groups. In his senior year 1000 out of the student body of 1300 were meeting every morning to pray.

The Student Volunteer Movement held a conference every four years. In 1905 William and some of his fellow students attended the conference in Nashville. Samuel Zwemer was one of the speakers.

William wrote: "**He had a map and a burning passion for Christ. He was full of facts and enthusiasm, but deadly sincere. He made that map speak – 200 million people in the Muslim World. He said there were more Muslims in China than Persia, more in China than the whole of Egypt or even Arabia and no one was giving himself to reaching the Muslims of China.**

Here is what he said about Islam, 'No bondage on earth is more relentless, more deadening and to its women more degrading. From China to the west coast of Africa and from the steppes of Russia right down to Zanzibar stretches the sweep of its influence and control. Only from scattered outposts is any Christian light spreading. Now is the time! The hour is right! Not an expedition of ease. It's going to cost many lives – not lives only, but prayers tears and blood.' "

From this time William set his sights on Gansu Province in north-west China – isolated – thrust out between Mongolia and Tibet. George Hunter and P.C. Mather (CIM) were 40 days journey west from Gansu. There were 60 cities in Gansu without a witness. William saw service in such a place not as a sacrifice but as a privilege of the highest order.

But William was eager to share the Gospel right where he was. The Student Volunteer Movement started a work they called **Yale Hope Mission** in New Haven Connecticut. In this seaport the need was great and many were without work or home. William threw himself into this work. He was heir to his family fortune and was able to fund a great deal of Christian work including this venture. He always did this anonymously.



Prof Henry Wright said of Yale Hope Mission, "**It is my firm conviction that it has done more to convince all classes of men at Yale of the power and practicality of Christianity to regenerate individuals and communities than any other force in the University.**"

William excelled in all his studies. He never let Christian work prevent him from grasping every educational opportunity. His father died in his sophomore year at Yale and he took responsibility to step up as the man in the family to care for his mother. That same year he offered himself to the CIM. He was refused and they recommended that he complete his studies at Yale and enrol in Princeton Theological Seminary. On completion of his studies at Princeton CIM accepted him for work among the Muslims in China.

On leaving Princeton William worked for some months with John Mott in the Student Volunteer Movement. He visited 30 colleges and seminaries speaking on the needs of the Muslim World before leaving for Egypt en route to China.

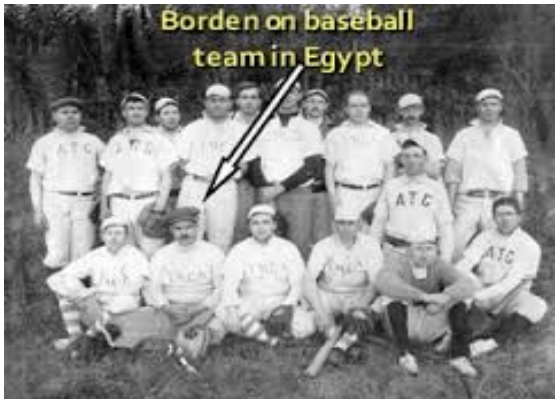

William Bordon and classmates – Student Volunteer Mission 1905

On December 17, 1912 William set sail for Egypt on the SS Mauritania. He was just 25 years old. On arrival in Cairo Samuel Zwemer met him at the railway station. Under Zwemer's supervision he studied Arabic and Muslim literature. He was very active in the YMCA and took every opportunity to distribute Christian literature specially prepared for Muslims. He was excited to discover that there was one lonely Chinese student from Gansu Province at Al Azhar. He went with Mr. Gairdner to meet him. He commented, "**He is the first Chinese Muslim I have met as far as I know**".

Zwemer said of him, "**I never saw a man come to Egypt with eyes more open to see the Kingdom of God. He hadn't been in Cairo two weeks, before he organised the students of the theological school to attempt a house-to-house canvas with Christian literature for the entire city of 800,000 people.**" Mr Gairdner said, "**He was brim full of energy and hope bringing a new element into our midst**".

During these months in Cairo William lived in the family of Gamil Hassoon – a Syrian Christian. Gamil said of him, "**It was a real pleasure and honour to have Mr. William Borden live in my house in Cairo. He was perfectly at home with the poverty my family lived in. It is beyond my power to describe his great zeal and diligence in studying the difficult Arabic language. But though he was so absorbed, so fond, so overwhelmed with his studies, he didn't make Arabic his only aim. He looked to what was higher and nobler and appointed a large portion of his time for reading the sacred Scriptures.**"

William had arrived in Cairo full of enthusiasm to prepare for the task ahead of him – reaching Muslims in Gansu Province, China. As he prepared he threw himself into the task of evangelism among Muslims in Cairo. He wasted no effort.



Each day he put his life completely in the hands of God and listened for His voice so he might follow His leading for that day.

On Good Friday March 21, 1913 William was taken ill. Gamil Hassoon phoned Mrs. Zwemer. Samuel had just left on a trip to Jeddah. The next day William was taken to the hospital. On Easter Sunday they learned that he had cerebral meningitis. Mrs. Zwemer couldn't reach his mother as she had left with his sister, Joyce, to join him in the mountains of Lebanon for the summer. She was sailing for Alexandria, but not due to reach Gibraltar until April 1st. They managed to reach his sister Mary in London on her way home from India. She immediately set out for Cairo, but the earliest she could arrive was April 2nd.

Mrs. Borden's sister, Miss Whiting, stayed in the Borden home in New York and handled the many enquiries that came in as to William's welfare. Many were praying for him. Samuel Zwemer arrived back from Jeddah and William's sister Mary arrived in Cairo. His mother, Joyce, and their long-time friend Ada von Fallenberg docked at Port Said on the 18th day of his sickness. They were relieved he was still alive, but as they journeyed to Cairo William died. It was peaceful he just stopped breathing. The funeral was held the same afternoon at the American Cemetery. They sang the lovely hymn, '**Face-to-face with Christ my Saviour**'. The final hymn was '**Jesus saves**' with the last verse:

"Sing it softly through the gloom,
While the heart for mercy craves.
Sing in triumph o'er the tomb,
Jesus saves!"

The Muslim gravediggers were astonished! There was such a contrast to the wailing they were used to at Muslim funerals and they were amazed to see Egyptian Christians weeping at the grave of a foreigner. Zwemer spoke on 2 Tim. 4:7-8, ***"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."***

Many who had shared William's life at different points now shared their thoughts as a tribute and to the glory of God. James McCammon, a fellow student at Princeton, wrote: **"The secret of William Borden's life was his belief in the sufficiency and abiding presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. For him it was more than a belief it was a reality."** Another fellow student wrote: **"Life for Bill was not a question of being or having this or that. It was simply a question of the will of God – knowing it, doing it, loving it."**

Charles Erdman, one of his professors at Princeton, listed his "qualifications":

- gifts of physical and mental strength, of wealth and social position, of culture and inspiring friendships
- a striking example of Christian stewardship
- clearly defining an adequate evangelistic message
- a clear vision for the task
- complete dedication to the task
- excellent preparation for the task
- zeal in recruiting others for the task

After William's death a biographical sketch of his life written for Muslim readers was compiled and published in five languages including Chinese for Gansu province. In all, 35,000 copies were distributed throughout every province in China.

At different stages of his life William had faced quite a bit of opposition (even from fellow Christians) to the calling he believed he had from God. Since he was heir to a great fortune, many thought he was "throwing himself away". At this stage he wrote in the back of his Bible **"no reserve"**.

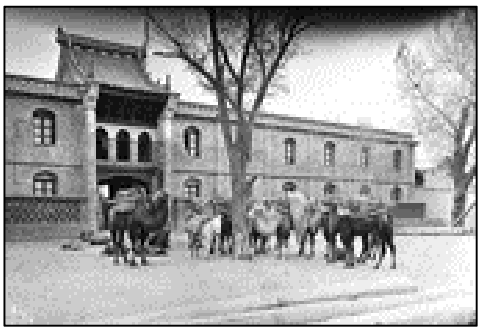
After graduation at Yale he turned down a number of high-paying job offers. In the back of his Bible he added **"no retreat"**. At some time prior to his death he added two more words **"no regrets"**.

In his will William left $1 million to Christian missions including CIM that he was joining. With this they established the Borden Memorial Hospital in Lanzhou, Gansu Province to be able to reach out to Muslims such as those Borden had hoped to serve.

As news of William's death was cabled to America, the following tribute was written in the Princeton Seminary Bulletin: "**No young man of his age has ever given more to the service of God and humanity. For Borden not only gave his wealth, but himself in a way so joyous and natural that it was manifestly a privilege rather than a sacrifice.**"



Courtyard of Al Azhar University, Cairo 1912



Borden Memorial Hospital – Lanzhou, Gansu Province

No Reserve – No Retreat – No Regrets

During the year that William travelled round the world before starting at Yale, his mother sent him these verses. They reached him in Japan. He treasured them and lived by them. They were in his Bible in the hospital in Cairo. Indeed **he did serve ever with all his might!**

Just as I am, Thine own to be,
Friend of the young, who lovest me,
To consecrate myself to Thee
O Jesus Christ, I come.

In the glad morning of my day,
My life to give, my vows to pay,
With no reserve and no delay
With all my heart, I come.

I would live ever in the light,
I would work ever for the right,
I would serve ever with all my might
Therefore to Thee I come.

Just as I am, young, strong and free,
To be the best that I can be
For truth and righteousness and Thee
Lord of my life, I come.