

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday,  
November 13, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

### **REVELATION 20:15**

15 If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the  
lake of fire.

### **WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH . . . BIBLICAL ANSWERS TO EVERYDAY QUESTIONS #2** **HELL AND ETERNAL PUNISHMENT**

Earlier this year Time Magazine asked the question, "What if there's no hell?" It was a response to the controversy that has emerged since popular pastor; Rob Bell published his best-selling book, *Love Wins*, in which Bell pronounces among other things:

- All people will eventually be saved. Every person to ever live will eventually embrace Christ, if not in this life, then in the next.<sup>1</sup>
- Those who have said, "No," to God's love in this life will have endless opportunities to say, "Yes," to it in the afterlife.<sup>2</sup>
- It would be cruel for Jesus to say to those after death, "Door's locked. Sorry. If you had been here earlier, I could have done something. But now it's too late."<sup>3</sup>
- Hell is not "about someday, somewhere else," but about the various "hells on earth" that people experience in this life – genocide, rape, and unjust socioeconomic structures.<sup>4</sup>
- When Jesus used the word hell, which is the Greek word, gehenna, He was referring to a garbage dump outside Jerusalem, where the Jews used to throw their trash.<sup>5</sup>
- Hell serves as a place of pruning or correcting for the unbeliever which ultimately leads to their salvation.<sup>6</sup>

So, is Bell right? Is hell temporary? Is hell's fire going to refine the unregenerate? Was gehenna a word that Jesus used to refer to a garbage dump that First Century Jews were familiar with? Or, is hell a literal place where the unregenerate are subject to eternal punishment?

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), p. 107

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-93.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-93.

We are in week two of our series, “What’s The Deal With . . . Biblical Answers to Everyday Questions.” Since the release of Rob Bell’s book, I have had more people ask me about the doctrine of hell than at any point in my pastoral ministry. That is a good thing. It is important for us to think correctly about the doctrine of hell.

And, if we’re honest, it’s something that we don’t like to spend a lot of time thinking about.

Like I said last week, when addressing questions about heaven, this sermon is not meant to be the *end-all, authoritative word* on all that the Bible has to teach us about hell. You may disagree with some of what I say today. I want to encourage you to check everything that I say against the Word of God. We will just scratch the surface of what the Bible has to say about hell. I’ve purchased several copies of Francis Chan’s newest book *Erasing Hell*, which are available for purchase in the lobby today. It’s a quick read that deals with what God says about eternity and the things that we’ve made up about the subject. I appreciate the care that Francis took in writing the book about a very difficult topic. In the year 2011, I do not believe that there is any other doctrine that is under as much scrutiny in the modern church as the doctrine of hell. This sermon will examine some of the questions that have recently been brought up about the topic of hell. Is hell as literal place? Why would a loving God condemn anyone to an eternity in hell? Isn’t hell just a reference to a place where garbage was burned and no one would want to live? Did God create hell? Is it okay to pray a prayer to become a Christian out of a fear of hell more so than out of a love for God?

Ultimately we are going to attempt to find what Jesus and other New Testament authors wrote about hell. As we begin, I want to read you something from the introduction of *Erasing Hell*. Francis Chan says something that I think many of you will relate to. I know that I do.

*If you are excited to read this book, you have issues.*

*Do you understand the weight of what we are about to consider? We are exploring the possibility that you and I may end up being tormented in hell. Excited would be the wrong term to use here. Necessary would be more fitting.*

*For some, this discussion will open up old wounds. It certainly does for me.*

*The saddest day of my life was the day I watched my grandmother die. When that EKG monitor flatlined, I freaked out. I absolutely lost it! According to what I knew of the Bible, she was headed for a life of never-ending suffering. I thought I would go crazy. I have never cried harder, and I don’t ever want to feel like that again. Since that day, I have tried not to think about it. It has been over twenty years.*

*Even as I write that paragraph, I feel sick. I would love to erase hell from the pages of Scripture.*

*How about you? Have you ever struggled with hell as I have? Do you have any parents, siblings, cousins, or friends who, based on what you have been taught, will end up in hell? What a bone-chilling thought. Until recently, whenever the idea of hell – and the idea of my loved ones possibly heading there – crossed my mind, I would brush it aside and divert my thinking to something more pleasant. While I've always believed in hell with my mind, I tried not to let the doctrine penetrate my heart.*

*But I reached a point where I could no longer do this. I could no longer acknowledge hell with my lips while preventing my heart from feeling its weight. I had to figure out if the Bible actually taught the existence of a literal hell. How great would it be if it didn't? Then I would be able to embrace my grandmother again someday.*

*So I decided to write a book about hell. And honestly – I'm scared to death.*

*I'm scared because so much is at stake. Think about it. If I say there is no hell, and it turns out that there is a hell, I may lead people into the very place I convinced them did not exist! If I say there is a hell, and I'm wrong, I may persuade people to spend their lives frantically warning loved ones about a terrifying place that isn't real! When it comes to hell, we can't afford to be wrong. This is not one of those doctrines where you can toss in your two cents, shrugging your shoulders, and move on. Too much is at stake. Too many people are at stake. And the Bible has too much to say.<sup>7</sup>*

We can't afford to be wrong about hell!

David Legge writes the following, “An evangelist tells the story of visiting Francis and Edith Schaeffer in their Switzerland home in L'Abri. After dinner one night the conversation ranged over several profound theological subjects, and suddenly someone asked Dr Schaeffer: ‘What will happen to those who have never heard of Christ?’ Everyone around the dinner table was waiting for some great theological answer, a weighty intellectual response - and none came. Instead, he bowed his head and wept.

You see, that is the reaction that the reality of hell [that we considered last night -] requires of us: to bow our heads and weep. Yet it is so lacking. I know it is lacking in my life, and I imagine that you're no different. R. Dale once said of D.L. Moody that ‘he had the right to preach about hell, because he so clearly did so from a weeping heart.’ Do we have weeping hearts when we attempt to speak to others about their need of Christ?”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell: What God Said About Eternity, And the Things We've Made Up* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2011), pp. 13-15.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.preachtheword.com/sermon/evangelism02.shtml>

As much as we don't like to talk about hell, we must. But, like D. L. Moody who said, "I must not preach hell unless I preach it with tears," we must look at this topic with sober and reverent hearts. And so, let's take a look at the first of our questions this morning.

### 1) What kind of God would condemn a person to hell?

Those of us who have lost people we love and believe that today they are awaiting their final judgment at which time they will be thrown into the fires of hell have to have struggled with this question. Why would God create a person that He ultimately knew would reject Him and thus spend eternity in hell? Is that a loving God?

We may be angry with God as we ask such questions. We may feel guilty that we didn't do enough to share the truth of the Gospel with our loved ones. We may feel like we did more than enough. We agonized, we prayed, we pleaded, we did so much and still that person chose to reject Christ.

We may wonder if it's okay to question God. The Bible is full of men and women who asked tough questions to God. The entire book of Habakkuk is the chronicle of the prophet's difficult questions and God's answers to those questions. Job, who was *the most righteous man* on planet earth, went through incredible suffering, all allowed by God. He asked difficult questions and in Job 38, God responded to those questions by putting Job on the witness stand. He asks Job revealing questions, showing that He is in control and Job is not. Listen to some of those words:

4 "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Tell me, if you understand.

5 Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it?

6 On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone—

7 while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels shouted for joy?

8 "Who shut up the sea behind doors  
when it burst forth from the womb,

9 when I made the clouds its garment  
and wrapped it in thick darkness,

10 when I fixed limits for it  
and set its doors and bars in place,

11 when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther;  
here is where your proud waves halt'?

12 "Have you ever given orders to the morning,  
or shown the dawn its place,

13 that it might take the earth by the edges  
and shake the wicked out of it?

14 The earth takes shape like clay under a seal;  
its features stand out like those of a garment.

15 The wicked are denied their light,  
and their upraised arm is broken.

16 “Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea  
or walked in the recesses of the deep?

17 Have the gates of death been shown to you?  
Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death?

18 Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth?  
Tell me, if you know all this.

The chapter goes on as does the entire next chapter and the next and the next, all the way to chapter 42, answering Job’s very real, raw and honest questions about God’s justice.

At one point, in chapter 40 of Job, God asks Job an important question.

2 “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!”

In other words, will the creation, question the Creator? Does the creation know better than the Creator?

In Romans 9:20-21, the Apostle Paul wrote:

20 But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” 21 Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

In Isaiah 55:8-9, God says:

8 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,”  
declares the LORD.

9 “As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

I like what Francis Chan writes here. “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts.’ It means we think differently! He hasn’t asked us to figure out why He does the things He does. We can’t. We are not capable. Our thinking is inferior to His. Let’s not think that spending a bit of time meditating on the mysteries of the universe places us on a level that allows us to call God into question. Our God is not a person who is slightly more intelligent: His thoughts are infinitely higher than ours. Knowing that the gap is so large, shouldn’t we

put our energy into submitting rather than overanalyzing? It is natural – no it is expected – that there will be times, many times, when you won't want to figure Him out.”<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately when we ask the question, “What kind of God would condemn a person to hell?” we are saying, “I wouldn't do that! That God doesn't make sense to me!” We, in a sense, want to create God in our image. We want to think if we wouldn't condemn a person to hell, then surely God wouldn't. After all, He is good. He is infinitely better than us. But, there are lots of things in Scripture that God does, that you wouldn't have done. The question is, “Are you going to let God be God, and trust Him, and trust in His character, and trust in His ultimate attributes that attest to the fact that He is holy and righteous, and loving and good, and just? Or are you going to trust in your emotions and how you feel that God should respond in any and all situations?”

In Psalm 115:3, the Psalmist wrote, “3 Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.” Do you believe that? Because, ultimately God has the right to do whatever pleases Him, whether or not we agree with it.

## 2) Is hell a literal place?

For those who prefer the *Reader's Digest* answer to the question, let me just answer with a simple, “Yes.” Hell is a literal place. It is spoken of in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus refers to it. The New Testament writers refer to it. Just as heaven is the dwelling place of God, the angels and those who have already died who have a relationship with Christ, hell is the literal dwelling place of Satan and his demons and the ultimate destination of those who die without a relationship with Jesus Christ. In the days of Jesus, an Orthodox Jewish person would have held to the belief that:

- a. Hell is a place of punishment after judgment.
- b. Hell is described in imagery of fire and darkness, where people lament.
- c. Hell is a place of annihilation or never-ending punishment.<sup>10</sup>

It was not just an imaginary place. Jesus' contemporaries formed their ideas of hell from Old Testament passages such as Daniel 12 and Ezekiel 32. We are limited in time today, so I'll just read one Old Testament passage, Daniel 12:2, which says:

2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.

If you continue to read the Daniel 12 and Ezekiel 32 passages you see where the people of Jesus' day came up with their ideas about hell. The real question for us today is, “What did Jesus teach about hell?” Were His teachings consistent with the beliefs of other First Century Jews, or did Jesus teach a radical new truth concerning hell that turned the tables upside down on the conventional thinking of His day and age?

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Jesus said a lot about hell. Twelve times, in the Gospels, Jesus used the word gehenna, which we translate as hell. Chan writes, “He also uses images of fire and darkness in contexts where punishment after judgment is in view. A quick look at these statements shows that Jesus believed, like his contemporaries, that a horrific place of punishment awaits the wicked on judgment day.”<sup>11</sup>

Jesus spoke more about hell and judgment than He did about heaven. In Matthew 25:31-46 we have some of Jesus’ clearest teaching on hell. In this famous passage speaking about the judgment day, Christ gives us the following warning:

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

37 “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

40 “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

44 “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

45 “He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

There is no question, that in this passage alone, Jesus shares the contemporary view of His day that:

- a. Hell is a place of punishment after judgment.
- b. Hell is described in imagery of fire and darkness, where people lament.
- c. Hell is a place of annihilation or never-ending punishment.<sup>12</sup>

This isn't the only place that Jesus talks about hell being a place of punishment after judgment. Jesus talks about this in Matthew 5:22 and Matthew 23:33 as well.

Jesus uses the imagery of fire and darkness where people lament to describe hell in several places. In Matthew 13, he is giving a parable to describe true followers of God and those who aren't. He compares a true follower to wheat and those who will spend eternity in hell to weeds.

Listen to the imagery that Jesus uses in verses 40-43 of Matthew 13.

40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

He uses similar words at the end of the chapter. Look at verses 49-50.

49 This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous 50 and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Hell is described as a terrifying place with people in anguish.

In Matthew 18:8-9, Jesus again talks about hell.

8 If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

Jesus is talking about a literal place, with an eternal fire where people will one day be sent to.

In Matthew 8:11-12, Matthew 22:13, and Matthew 25:30 we read more of Jesus' teaching about hell, continuing to paint it as a place where there will be darkness, weeping, gnashing of teeth and punishment.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

### 3. Isn't hell just a reference to a place on the outskirts of Jerusalem where garbage was burned and no one would want to live?

In his book, *Love Wins*, Rob Bell describes *gehenna*, the word that Jesus uses to describe hell as being a garbage dump on the outskirts of Jerusalem where the Jews used to throw their trash.

He writes, "People tossed their garbage and waste into this valley. There was fire there, burning constantly to consume the trash. Wild animals fought over the scraps of food along the edges of the heap. When they fought, their teeth would make a gnashing sound. Gehenna was the place with the gnashing of teeth, where the fire never went out. Gehenna was an actual place that Jesus' listeners would have been familiar with. So the next time someone asks you if you believe in an actual hell, you can always say, 'Yes, I do believe that my garbage goes somewhere.'" <sup>13</sup>

If only it was that simple. The people in Jesus' day wouldn't have thought of Gehenna as a garbage dump. There is no archeological evidence that suggest that the Valley of Hinnom, which is what *gehenna* literally means was the town dump. The first reference to the Valley of Hinnom being a town dump wasn't even made until A.D. 1200 by Rabbi David Kimhi, a rabbi who wrote in the Middle Ages from Europe, not Israel. Chan writes, "What are the chances that Jesus is thinking of this town dump in using the term *gehenna*, when we have no evidence that there was such a place until over a thousand years after He lived? There's no evidence in the piles and piles of Jewish and Christian writing preceding the time of Kimhi that the word *gehenna* was derived from the burning garbage in the Hinnom Valley." <sup>14</sup>

Think about it. In light of all we've just read that Jesus said about hell, would it make sense that Jesus was warning His followers about the burning garbage dump? No, Jesus was describing a place of fire and darkness where people lament, which He described in Matthew 25:41 and 46 as being an eternal fire with eternal punishment. There are Christians who believe, as some did in the day of Jesus that those who go to hell would be annihilated, but I think the Scriptural evidence is stacked much greater to suggest an eternal punishment.

### 4. What did other New Testament Authors Say About Hell?

Oh, I wish we had time today to go into all that the New Testament says about hell. Paul, Peter, Jude and John all wrote extensively about hell. It's interesting to note than in all thirteen of his letters, Paul never used the word *hell* one time. However, he talked about the fate of the wicked more than any other New Testament author. <sup>15</sup>

You get a taste of Paul's passion concerning hell in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9.

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<sup>13</sup> Bell, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> Chan and Sprinkle, p. 60.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power

Paul was passionate about getting the truth of the Gospel out. He didn't want anyone to die and go to hell. So serious was Paul about sharing His faith that he was imprisoned multiple times. He would preach to whoever would listen. In Romans 9:2-3a Paul wrote, "2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers"

Peter, Jude and John all wrote about hell. Chan writes, "Apart from those of Paul, two other letters speak extensively of wrath and judgment. In fact, 2 Peter 2 alone looks like a chapter out of Dante's *Inferno*, while the book of Jude reads like a medieval tract written to scare peasants into unwavering church attendance and a steady tithe. These two books speak of 'destruction' (2 Peter 2:1, 3, 12; 3:7, 9; Jude 5, 10, 11), 'punishment' (2 Peter 2:9, Jude 7), 'judgment' (2 Peter 2:4, 9; Jude 4), 'condemnation' (2 Peter 2:3, Jude 4), 'hell' (2 Peter 2:4), and retributive suffering (2 Peter 2:13) that await the ungodly who don't follow Jesus. Hell is described as 'the gloom of utter darkness' (2 Peter 2:17, Jude 13) and the 'punishment of eternal fire' (Jude 7, 23), terms that would be very familiar, as we have seen, in the authors' Jewish contexts."<sup>16</sup>

Nowhere in the Bible is hell described as vividly as it is in Revelation. Again, time this morning will not allow us to go into detail, but I would encourage you to read Revelation chapter 14 and chapters 20-22 for an even clearer picture at what hell will be like. Let me just read one verse from Revelation 20.

15 If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

## 5. What now?

That ought to stir us. We've just scratched the surface on what the Bible has to say about hell. I hope you can see that when Jesus spoke about hell, He was speaking of actual place, where billions upon billions of people will spend eternity. Today, there are 1.5 billion people living on planet earth who have yet to hear the Gospel. 1.5 billion!<sup>17</sup>

We, who know the *Good News*, we who deserve to spend eternity in hell but have been shown the grace of God through the gift of salvation given to us through Jesus Christ, have a responsibility to share that *Good News* with the world around us. Chan writes, "We should not just try to cope with hell, but be compelled – as with all doctrine – to live differently in light of it.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

In fact, Peter makes exactly this point in 2 Peter 3. He describes the Lord's return, the day of judgment, and the destruction of the ungodly. And what does he conclude? That we should throw our hands up in despair because there's nothing we can do about it anyway? No. He asks a pointed question: 'Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness?' (2 Peter 3:11).

In light of this truth and for the sake of people's eternal destiny, our lives and our churches should be – no, they must be! – free from the bondage of sin, full of selfless love that overflows for neighbors, the downcast, and the outsiders among us.

In other words, we need to stop explaining away hell and start proclaiming His solution to it.<sup>18</sup>

Okay, one final question that we'll deal with this morning.

## **6. Is it okay to pray a prayer to become a Christian out of a fear of hell more so than out of a love for God?**

Well, maybe the question says more about us than it does about God. Nowhere in the Bible do we read that we become a Christian through saying a prayer. Here at Woodbury Community Church, I often invite people to pray a prayer in which they ask Jesus to forgive them of their sins and become their Savior and Lord. God has always judged the heart. There are people who will get to heaven some day and say, "Didn't I do this in your name or that in your name . . . didn't I go to church . . . didn't I say a prayer . . . didn't I go on mission trips . . . didn't I care for my fellow human beings . . ." to which God will say, "Away from me, I never knew you."

The criterion for spending eternity with God in heaven is truly giving Him the rule and reign in your life. We cannot be forgiven if we don't recognize first our spiritual poverty and rely completely upon Him. We don't become followers of Jesus because we fear hell; we become followers of Jesus because we recognize that He first loved us and respond in love towards Him, accepting the gift that He offers us through the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. If you have never trusted in Jesus as your Savior and Lord, I want to invite you to do so today. Don't let this be a solely academic exercise, but truly give Christ your life. When you do, He will save you once and for all from fires of hell.

*Dear Heavenly Father,*

*I thank You today for Jesus. Forgive me for making life about me. Today, I confess all of my sins to you. I ask you to forgive me and cleanse me and to become Lord of my life from this point forward. I yield my allegiance, my love and my heart to you. My life is yours, and I ask you to give me the courage to both live for You and join You in Your mission of making more disciples for Jesus Christ. I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.*

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145-146.