

**Oswald Chambers:**  
*Abandoned to God*

# **Oswald Chambers:** *Abandoned to God*

*The Life Story of the Author of  
My Utmost for His Highest*

David McCasland

*Oswald Chambers: Abandoned to God*  
© 1993 Oswald Chambers Publications Association, Ltd.  
All rights reserved.

Discovery House Publishers is affiliated with RBC Ministries,  
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49512

Discovery House books are distributed to the trade exclu-  
sively by Barbour Publishing, Inc., Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

McCasland, David.

Oswald Chambers : abandoned to God : the life story of  
the author of My utmost for his highest / David McCasland.

p. cm.

Originally published: © 1993.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-57293-050-0 (pbk.)

1. Chambers, Oswald, 1874-1917. 2. Clergy—  
Great Britain—Biography. 3. Evangelists—Great Britain—  
Biography. 4. Christian poetry, English. I. Title.

[BR1725.C43M33 1998]

269'.2'092—dc21

[B]

98-43187

CIP

*Printed in the United States of America*

04 05 / EB / 11 10 9 8 7

**Editor's Note:** All of Oswald Chambers' letters, diary entries, and  
prayer journal entries are represented here exactly as they appear in the  
their original form. Mr. Chambers' poems, while not substantially  
altered, have been punctuated and typeset according to the standard  
conventions of poetry.

Once again,  
To Kathleen

## CONTENTS

1. A Kernel of Wheat. . . . .	9
2. The Seed of Greater Things . . . . .	15
PART 1	
3. A Scottish Boyhood (1874–1889) . . . . .	23
4. London (1889–1895) . . . . .	31
PART 2	
5. Edinburgh (1895–1897) . . . . .	47
6. Dunoon (1897) . . . . .	65
7. Dark Night of the Soul (1897–1901) . . . . .	73
8. The Wider Sphere (1902–1906) . . . . .	87
PART 3	
9. The Wandering Prophet in America (1906–1907) . . . . .	101
10. Japan (1907) . . . . .	119
PART 4	
11. The League of Prayer (1907–1908) . . . . .	133
12. The Young Lady on the Boat (1908) . . . . .	139
13. Leadership in the League (1908–1909) . . . . .	151
14. Together for Him (1909–1910) . . . . .	165
15. The Bible Training College (1911–1915) . . . . .	179
16. Launching All on Him (1914–1915) . . . . .	193
PART 5	
17. The Y.M.C.A. in Egypt (1915) . . . . .	211
18. War Work (1916) . . . . .	221
19. Broken Bread and Poured Out Wine (1916) . . . . .	231
20. In His Presence (1917) . . . . .	243
21. The Work Goes On (1917–1919) . . . . .	259
PART 6	
22. My Utmost (1919–1926) . . . . .	275
23. Words for the World (1927–1966) . . . . .	283
The Poems of Oswald Chambers . . . . .	289
Acknowledgments . . . . .	317
Bibliography . . . . .	321
Index . . . . .	329

# 1

## A KERNEL OF WHEAT

Cairo, Egypt—November 16, 1917

Biddy Chambers glanced beyond the straight rows of thin wooden crosses toward the tall, iron gates of the British military cemetery in Old Cairo. She knew the funeral cortege must be nearing, but the high stone walls surrounding the burial ground where she stood shielded her from the familiar street sounds so close, yet so distant from her mind today.

Beside her stood four-year-old Kathleen, quiet and uncomprehending. She knew that her Daddy had gone to be with Jesus, and that was wonderful. But Daddy had gone lots of places before—to Alexandria, to Fayoum, to Ismailia, or to Suez—and no doubt he would be home again soon.

Biddy glanced down at the little girl she and Oswald called their “flower of God.” Their eyes met and Kathleen’s face broke into a smile. Biddy wished she knew her daughter’s thoughts. Perhaps she understood perfectly that her Daddy was now helping the soldiers in heaven and wouldn’t be coming back at all. Because of her childlike trust in God, she might be able to accept that awful finality better than all the grown-ups around her. Kathleen did know that something had made her mother very sad. The day before, Biddy had wept as she wrapped her arms around her carefree daughter and said, “Your Daddy has gone to heaven.” That was the first time Kathleen had ever seen her mother cry.

A glimpse of horses on the street drew Biddy’s eyes back to the gate. She squinted a bit—her characteristic reaction to something with which she didn’t completely agree. She was uncomfortable with the extent of this military funeral for Oswald. She had consented to it only because of the men he had served and

loved. This was their way of honoring him and saying good-bye.

The funeral cortege had started at 4:00 p.m. from Gizeh Red Cross Hospital, a mile away on the west bank of the Nile. The casket, draped with the Union Jack and covered with a spray of white chrysanthemums, rested on a gun carriage drawn by a team of four black horses. Six officers marched alongside the casket while an escort of a hundred soldiers followed, with rifles reversed—the traditional sign of respect for a fallen comrade in arms.

Under a cloudless sky the procession had moved eastward across the bridge spanning the murky, green waters of the Nile. Donkey carts and vegetable vendors stood silently in the dusty streets as the soldiers and the gun carriage moved slowly past. Barefoot children gazed in wonder.

In the west the glowing sun, revered and worshipped by the ancient Egyptians, dropped toward the Sphinx and the towering pyramids of Gizeh. Beyond them the Great Western Desert stretched silently into a shimmering horizon.

By November 1917, World War I had slogged into its fourth murderous year, and death was a frequent visitor to the hospitals and convalescent homes of Egypt. Military funerals were common in Cairo, but this one was unusual, containing elements reserved for a high ranking officer or government official. It was extraordinary that the man so honored was neither officer nor official but the Rev. Oswald Chambers, Y.M.C.A. secretary at nearby Zeitoun.

A large contingent of civilians, including women and Egyptians, awaited the procession at the burial site. Even the native servants from Zeitoun had come in solemn grief. One eyewitness later recalled that "almost everyone Chambers knew in Cairo found their way quietly and simply to the place."

Affectionately known among the troops as "the O.C." (an abbreviation for the Officer in Charge), Chambers had died the day before of complications following surgery for a ruptured appendix. As the word of his passing traveled up the line, from Cairo to Palestine, hundreds of men received the news in stunned disbelief. Surely there was some mistake, a garbled message, a misunderstanding. Why would God take Chambers

when He had so few men like him? And why at the age of forty-three? It made no sense at all.

Many soldiers stole away to quiet places to face their loss in private and give thanks for the now-completed life of this young, dynamic man of God. How many times he had said to them, "Nothing that happens can upset God or the Almighty Reality of Redemption." On the front lines near Beersheba, the news struck Peter Kay like a bullet in the chest. His mind wandered back to the days at Zeitoun with his little friend, Kathleen Chambers, and her father. How easily they had slipped past his guard against religious people. Oswald had been the first chaplain to penetrate Kay's tough exterior through simple friendship and genuine respect. Peter's only religion had been wine, women, and song when he listened to Chambers talk about Jesus Christ and His atonement. He pictured the night he stood outside the Devotional Hut and claimed Christ as his Savior and Lord. And now Chambers was dead? Peter Kay bowed his head and wept uncontrollably when he heard the news. None of his mates from the Australian outback could understand what had reduced the battle-hardened soldier to such tears.

Biddy watched the officers gently carry her husband's casket into the peaceful quiet of the cemetery. Throughout the long days and nights beside him in the hospital, she had been so sure that Oswald would make it. The word from the Bible to her own heart during that time had seemed so clear, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God."

Gladys Ingram and Eva Spink held hands tightly, trying to hold back the tears they knew Oswald would have smiled away. At the Bible Training College in London, he had spoken so confidently of a loving God who never makes mistakes. When the war came, hadn't God led them all to Egypt in His service? Hadn't He promised to watch over them and keep them in His care? Hadn't He?

Rev. Samuel Zwemer, a noted American missionary, spoke briefly, along with Padre William Watson, a Scottish chaplain. Their message was of Jesus Christ, of His work through His servant Oswald Chambers, and of every Christian's eternal hope in Him.

Then, those assembled sang Psalm 121 from the Scottish Psalter:

*I to the hills will lift mine eyes  
 from whence doth come mine aid.  
 My safety cometh from the Lord,  
 who heav'n and earth hath made.  
 Thy foot he'll not let slide, nor will  
 he slumber that thee keeps.  
 Behold, he that keeps Israel,  
 he slumbers not, nor sleeps.  
 The Lord thee keeps, the Lord thy shade  
 on thy right hand doth stay:  
 The moon by night thee shall not smite,  
 nor yet the sun by day.  
 The Lord shall keep thy soul; he shall  
 preserve thee from all ill  
 Henceforth thy going out and in  
 God keep for ever will.*

After a prayer of thanksgiving and committal, they sang a final hymn, "For All the Saints Who from Their Labours Rest."

Stanley Barling, William Jessop, and Lord Radstock of the Y.M.C.A. sang with the mingled sense of loss and hope that Christians know in the face of death. With voices struggling through a flood of emotions, they remembered the optimism and irrepressible confidence in God that had endeared Chambers to them all. On the final verses, their voices, along with the others, rang out toward the twilight settling over the distant Mokattam Hills.

*But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;  
 The saints triumphant rise in bright array;  
 The King of glory passes on His way.  
 Alleluia! Alleluia!  
 From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,  
 Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host  
 Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
 Alleluia! Alleluia!*

A firing party from the Northumberland Fusiliers discharged three rifle volleys into the evening sky. The reports echoed into the distance as a bugler sounded the "Last Post."

Stanley Barling plucked a white chrysanthemum from the spray standing next to the grave, knelt down, and handed it to Kathleen with a smile. The words he wanted to say stuck in his throat as she sniffed the flower and returned his smile. He took her hand in both of his, gave it a gentle squeeze, then rose to his feet. How could she understand how much he was going to miss her father?

The crowd dispersed, talking, dabbing at eyes, and, yes, even smiling. For some, there was only a deep sense of loss. But for those who knew Oswald and his Savior, the sense of Christ's triumph overpowered the greatest pain. Bidy gently grasped Kathleen's hand and walked toward a waiting car. As they drove toward the Zwemer's house in central Cairo, she closed her eyes and saw Oswald, a few months before, polishing his boots in the Bungalow at Zeitoun. They had just visited their friend Gertrude Ballinger, suffering from typhoid fever and lying near death in a hospital.

Bidy had said, "I wonder what God is going to do."

Between brushstrokes, Oswald had replied, "I don't care what God *does*. It's what God *is* that I care about."

Bidy managed a smile. She knew the heart of love and concern from which her husband had spoken what might seem a callous remark. He cared deeply what happened to Miss Ballinger, but he knew that God's actions could be very confusing, while the Lord Himself never was.

She and Oswald had been married for just over seven years, and now, humanly speaking, the worst had happened. She was a widow at thirty-four, with a young daughter, no financial resources, and no means of support. If that were not enough, she was living away from the care of home and family in an inhospitable desert region of a foreign land during a time of war.

Already people were asking questions for which she had no answers: "Are you going to go back to England? What will this do to Kathleen? How will you manage without Oswald?"

Bidy closed her eyes, pulled Kathleen close to her, and softly began to sing the hymn that welled up in her heart: "Praise My Soul, the King of Heaven, to His Feet Thy Tribute Bring."

It would not be the last time she sang those words when all seemed lost and her only hope lay in the grace of Almighty God.

## 2

# THE SEED OF GREATER THINGS

The cable from Cairo arrived around mid-day at the stately London home of Mrs. Reader Harris, head of the Pentecostal League of Prayer. Hoping it contained good news, Mrs. Harris slit the envelope and quickly removed the thin paper inside. The message left her stunned.

### OSWALD IN HIS PRESENCE

Her mind raced to link the words with the reality they conveyed. Oswald gone from this life? But when, why, and how? People would want to know. But this was wartime, and everyone understood that letters posted that day in Egypt could take three weeks to arrive in England—providing the ship convoy eluded the German submarines. Perhaps she could cable the Y.M.C.A. to request more information.

Mrs. Harris gazed out the window at the fog-shrouded, barren trees on Clapham Common. Chambers had loved to walk the grassy fields of the common with his students from the Bible Training College, formerly located not fifty yards from where she stood. Now she must send the news of his passing throughout the League.

Four miles away in East Dulwich, Oswald's sister, Gertrude, answered the door of the Chambers' home at 11 Tintagel Crescent.

"A cable? Yes, thank you."

She returned to the small kitchen where Oswald's parents, Clarence and Hannah, sat at the table. Gertrude handed the envelope to her bearded, white-haired father, three weeks before

his eightieth birthday. Clarence read the words aloud, "OSWALD IN HIS PRESENCE."

No details. No explanation of why their youngest son was dead. This was the way of news in the war. Almost without comprehending the fact themselves, the three began writing to family members and friends. ". . . Cable just received from Cairo . . . Oswald with the Lord . . . will send more as we know." If the letters caught the early post, they would reach the others in England and Scotland by the next morning.

At the time of Chambers' death, American troops had been in Europe only five months. War fervor still throbbed in the United States as people sang "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy" and "We won't come back till it's over, over there." Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and other movie stars promoted Liberty bonds, and families prayed for a quick end to the war.

By the end of 1917, nearly every household in Britain had lost a husband, father, or son in the war. During the Battle of the Somme in July 1916, six hundred thousand Allied soldiers had been killed. The Germans had lost half a million men. People who could not absorb the tragedy on an international scale found themselves torn again and again by the pain of personal grief. Britain was weary of rationed food, financial hardships, and broken lives but was still determined to fight on. The conflict some had predicted would end in a few months approached its fourth Christmas with no sign of "peace on earth, good will toward men." The only bright spot was General Allenby's advance in Palestine. Chambers had been expecting orders to that front when his call came to "higher service."

Word of Chambers' death reached the Rev. David Lambert in Sunderland on Saturday, November 17. "Received the astounding news that Rev. Oswald Chambers has passed away in Egypt," he wrote in a diary letter to his son in France. "I cannot take it in. Dead e're his prime. Of all the men I have known, none have influenced me more. I loved him as my own soul. I have not felt any blow so much since little Normie died in 1908. It is not hopeless sorrow or resentment, but sheer staggerment."

Just over nine years before, Lambert and his wife, Emma, had met Chambers shortly after losing their youngest son. They had

buried Norman on a bank holiday weekend when the bright sunshine and happy crowds seemed to mock their sorrow. A month later, when Chambers came to Sunderland for a League of Prayer Convention, the grieving young couple longed for a word and a healing touch from God.

Out of curiosity, Lambert looked in on one of the afternoon League meetings and was “arrested by the vigorous style and virile message of a young minister with a Scottish accent.” Oswald’s subject, Regeneration, “fell like a lightning-stroke upon the artificiality and man-made activities of much of the religion of that time.”

Chambers became a guest in their home, a favorite friend of their children, and the source of lasting spiritual encouragement.

Lambert paused in the letter to his son and took a yellowed envelope from his desk drawer. From it, he removed a typical piece of hurried but succinct correspondence, received from Oswald in 1909:

*My dear Bro. Lambert,*

*Praise God for your report that the Devil is paying attention to you—so long as he keeps firing at us you may depend he thinks that we are worth watching. My hearty greetings to your wife and bairns.*

*The ‘plague of flies’ was not peculiar to Egypt—you will find them in the shape of busy little people that try to get over the window of your soul and irritate your outlook. God bless you.*

*Yours, Oswald Chambers*

On November 18, 1917, the day after receiving news of Oswald’s death, Lambert continued his diary: “The one thing with me most is the passing of O.C. I recall many scenes of the past when he first came to Wesley Hall, those marvellous Bible Readings he gave us. And now he has gone. And yet I realise him alive in a remarkable way. Not through any sense contact, but as I realise that Paul and Luther and Spurgeon and Moody and Reader Harris and the great saints are living. They are. So is O.C., in the radiance of His Presence.”

On December 5, 1917, the League of Prayer's Wednesday evening meeting at Caxton Hall, Westminster, was set apart as a memorial service for Chambers. After tributes from League members and friends, Oswald's eldest brother, Arthur, took the podium.

He described Oswald as a "young hero of the Cross" and likened him to Barnabas—"a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith" (Acts 11:24).

"Oswald was a man with an energetic, inspiring personality," Arthur said. "Once started in any direction, he quickly outpaced his teachers. I persuaded him to pray his first prayer in a prayer meeting, but he soon passed me by and became a master in intercession.

"He was full of the Holy Ghost and that was the secret of his happy service. He was absolutely free from worry, living what he liked to call a 'restlessly restful life.'

"Oswald was a good man with no value for mere money or personal advantage. He would give away to all who asked. He had no use for those who sought to make much of him instead of the message he had to bring.

"He was full of faith. How well I remember his return in 1907 from a round-the-world trip on which he felt called to go. He threw down half-a-crown and said, 'There, I've been round the world, all found, on no-pence a week, and have half-a-crown left.' On the first leg of that voyage, aboard the S.S. Baltic, he told me he had spoken on spiritual things to every one of the 1,300 people on board, from the captain to the boy in the stokehold.

" 'Much people was added to the Lord' sums up the result of his life. His one aim was to be 'broken bread and poured out wine' for the Master. Throughout his life, his early mornings were given to prayer for others and receiving the daily anointing which gave him such a skillful touch with souls both here in England and finally in Egypt."

The service closed with the singing of one of Oswald's favorite hymns, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go."

Ten days later, at another memorial service in Manchester, the Rev. David Lambert brought the tribute to O.C., outlining the teaching of the man whose life he called "the finest commentary

on the Sermon on the Mount I know." All of the hundreds there who knew the man being remembered could have added an unforgettable phrase uttered by him, or recalled an act of kindness, indelibly imprinted on their memory.

Lambert summed up the impact of this life lived so fully for the Lord: "The most precious thing that has come to many of us through the message of God's beloved servant, Oswald Chambers, is that for the lowliest, least promising, and most insignificant person, the Great Life is possible. The mightiest things are made available for ordinary persons in and through Christ Jesus our Lord.

"God help us to follow him as he followed Christ."

\* \* \* \* \*

That should have been the end of it. Oswald Chambers was only one of hundreds of thousands of British men who died during the Great War. We could expect his contemporaries to speak of him from time to time for months or even years, and then the references would fade with the passing of time and his generation. Instead, exactly the opposite has happened. Today, more people know his name and writings than when he was alive.

Long years after Chambers' death, his words are still in the hearts and on the lips of people around the world. The books that bear his name are read daily by literally millions of people in scores of languages. His messages can be found in print, on audio tapes, calendars, bookmarks, and even refrigerator magnets.

Why the continued interest in the words of a man who was born before automobiles, telephones, and electric lights? Why do his statements sound as if they were written right after he read today's newspaper?

The answer lies both in the message and the man. The two are inseparable. This is the story of their merging into the unique individual whom the world has refused to forget.

It is also the story of the woman standing at his grave in Old Cairo, wondering how she could go on without him.

Her given name was Gertrude, but Oswald always called her Biddy, an affectionate nickname. After Oswald's death, she spent the rest of her life giving his words to the world. The result of her

self-sacrificing work under very difficult conditions was some fifty books bearing his name, but never mentioning her own.

“When the heart sees what God wants,” Oswald used to say, “the body must be willing to spend and be spent for that cause alone.”

Both of them saw, they were willing, and they were spent. What follows is the story of *their* utmost for God’s highest.