

Oswald Chambers: *Abandoned to God*

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

David McCasland

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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.

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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. Biddy 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.

Biddy 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."

Biddy 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?"

Biddy 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.