

OSWALD CHAMBERS

A LIFE IN PICTURES

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from Our Daily Bread Ministries

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Oswald Chambers: A Life in Pictures

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Rooftops of Aberdeen, Scotland, Oswald Chambers's birthplace. The spire of the Kirk of Saint Nicholas is seen at right. A previous church building was destroyed by fire in 1874, the year Chambers was born.

1 GOD'S INSTITUTION

*Home is God's institution, and He says,
"Honour thy father and thy mother";
are we fulfilling our duty to our parents
as laid down in God's Book?*

OSWALD CHAMBERS, *Biblical Ethics*

Historical figures tend to occupy our memory as fully formed men and women, recalled from the days of their greatest achievements. Those familiar with Oswald Chambers likely envision him as a thirty- or forty-year-old man, as the preacher, the teacher, the army chaplain, the mind behind *My Utmost for His Highest*. It's harder to imagine him as the "chubby infant" his brother Ernest described, or as a little boy eagerly asking God for guinea pigs.

But the intellectual and spiritual giant who would ultimately earn worldwide fame began life just like everyone else—as a baby. Oswald was the eighth of nine children born to Clarence and Hannah Chambers; an older sister had died in infancy, so six siblings welcomed his arrival on July 24, 1874.

From the moment he entered the world, Oswald Chambers enjoyed the benefits of a Christian home. His parents, three brothers, and, eventually, four sisters constituted "God's institution," as Oswald would one day describe the family, his first great influence in life.



An early portrait of Oswald and his sister Gertrude (right), and (above) the entire Chambers family in the mid-1880s: Clarence and Hannah surrounded by (clockwise from lower left) Florence, Gertrude, Bertha, Arthur, Ernest, Edith, Franklin, and Oswald.



He and his siblings were PKs—preacher’s kids—and Clarence was pastoring in Aberdeen, Scotland, when Oswald was born. The elder Chambers was the tenth and, to that point, the longest serving minister (1866–77) of the Crown Terrace Baptist Church.

Photographs of Pastor Chambers show a stern-looking man, an interpretation supported by Franklin’s comment that “Father was very strict in our upbringing.” Oswald’s daughter, Kathleen, would recall her grandfather as “completely and utterly humorless . . . a dour, dour Scot who preached hellfire.”

Clarence Chambers was balanced by his wife, Hannah, who was “loving and gentle and very, very sweet,” in Kathleen’s recollection. Years after Oswald’s death in Egypt, Franklin recalled a family life filled with games: “We found our enjoyment and entertainment in our own home; no outside amusements could possibly compare with the fun and happiness to be found there.”

The Chambers home could trace its spiritual lineage through the famed British pastor Charles Haddon Spurgeon. “The Prince of Preachers,” whose Metropolitan Tabernacle in London held six thousand people, had baptized both Clarence and Hannah and had ordained Clarence to the ministry after he’d attended Spurgeon’s Pastors’ College. Ultimately, Clarence’s oldest and youngest sons—Arthur and Oswald—would follow him into full-time Christian service.

• • •

When Oswald was born, his siblings ranged in age from thirteen to two. “None divined him different than the rest,” the third oldest, Ernest, wrote in a poem shortly after Oswald’s death:

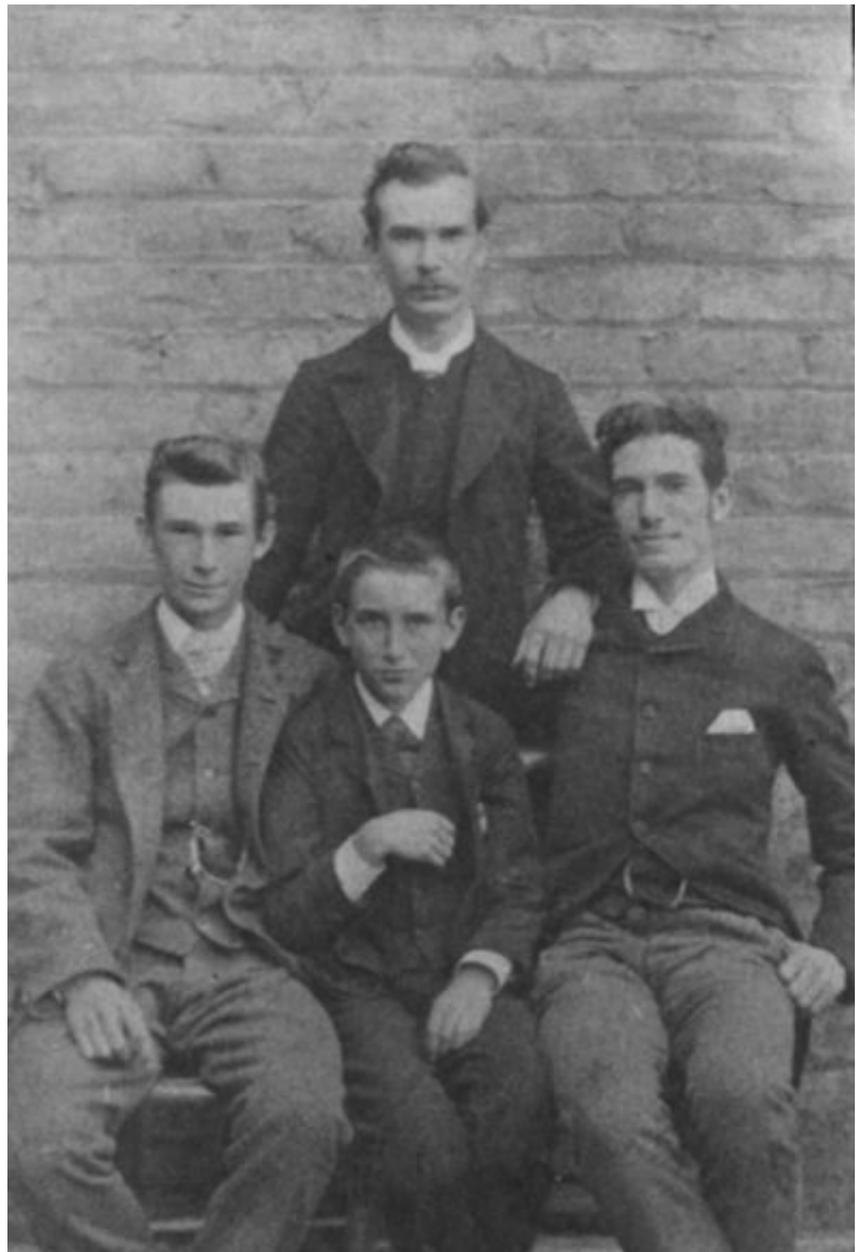
*He was our brother, and we never
guessed
Nor marked him for the “chosen
vessel” blest
He later would become.*

But Oswald’s spiritual nature soon drew his family’s notice. “As a child his prayers were very original,” Franklin recalled, “and frequently when he had gone to bed . . . the older members of the family, including his mother, would listen on the stairs to hear him pray.” Oswald’s petition for pets, offered “night after night,” was ultimately answered with two guinea pigs in the chicken coop. Franklin didn’t record who put them there but wrote that Oswald’s “delight was great.” This child-like confidence in God would continue throughout his entire life and ministry.

In time, like the brothers of Jesus, the Chambers siblings came to understand Oswald’s uniqueness. “He was our brother once, now he was more—God spake to us through him,” Ernest wrote:

*He was our brother still, but he
was, too,
God’s minister to us, his words
rang true,
He taught the way of Life like one
who knew,
For he had walked with Him.*

• • •



Oswald Chambers (sitting, center) at age twelve, with his three older brothers. Arthur (standing), twenty-five at the time of the photo, became a Baptist minister in Eltham, just east of London; Oswald’s future wife, Gertrude Hobbs, was part of Arthur’s congregation. Ernest (left), nineteen in this photo, became an artist in a china factory. Franklin (right), sixteen, became a chemist in a dye plant. Much of our knowledge of Oswald’s early years comes from the account Franklin wrote for the 1933 book compiled by Bidy, *Oswald Chambers: His Life and Work*.

When Oswald was five years old, the Chambers family moved from Aberdeen, on the North Sea, to the interior of England, nearly three hundred miles south. At Stoke-on-Trent, the heart of the nation's pottery industry, Clarence Chambers served two years as Home Missions Evangelist for the North Staffordshire Baptist Association, helping start a small church in nearby Fenton, before accepting a call back to Scotland. For the next eight years, until Oswald was fifteen, Clarence led the Baptist Chapel of Perth, a small city some seventy miles southwest of Aberdeen.

For a growing boy, Perth offered many pleasures. "During that time Oswald laid in a fine stock of health, running about the hillsides and along by the River Tay to the beautiful Woody Island," Franklin wrote. Perth was also the place of Oswald's first schooling outside the home, at Sharp's Institution.

Franklin said Oswald began showing a gift for drawing at this point in his life, "and this became his main joy at school." Interestingly, "the intense brain power of later life was not evident in those early days and he never won a prize while at school." Even more interesting, to the age of fifteen Oswald Chambers had not made a profession of faith in Christ.

Born, like Oswald Chambers, in 1874

- › Winston Churchill (British prime minister, 1940–45, '51–55)
- › Herbert Hoover (U.S. president, 1929–33)
- › G. K. Chesterton (British critic and author, creator of the Father Brown mysteries)
- › Erich Weiss (Hungarian-American magician better known as Harry Houdini)
- › Lucy Maud Montgomery (Canadian author of *Anne of Green Gables*)
- › Guglielmo Marconi (Italian physicist, known for the development of radio)
- › Howard Carter (British archaeologist, discoverer of King Tutankhamen's tomb)
- › Robert Frost (U.S. poet)



OPPOSITE: The city center of Perth, Scotland, is reflected on the River Tay. Oswald Chambers lived in Perth between the ages of seven and fifteen, while his father served as a Baptist pastor.



An undated photo of Clarence Chambers. Oswald's father trained for the ministry at Charles Spurgeon's Pastors' College in London, taking his first church in Romsey, about seventy miles southwest of London. Then he spent twelve years in Aberdeen, Scotland's Crown Terrace Baptist Church, resigning



after the congregation complained of “dissatisfaction and non-profiting” from his ministry. Oswald was not quite three at the time.

When Oswald began his own ministry, he and Clarence would have differences over money. While teaching at Dunoon, Scotland, Oswald wrote his father saying, “I know you would not hold the attitude you do regarding my present circumstances if you saw things as I do. ‘Worthy of my hire!’ Why, I have more than I deserve even of money. I have leisure to work at my will, and the opportunity of helping men towards realizing their call to the ministry, and I have the inward conviction that I am doing God’s will. I could, as you say, earn money elsewhere, but what is money-help compared to the eternal assistance I may be enabled to give to souls?”

“My father loved my grandfather very much,” Kathleen Chambers recalled decades later, “but of course, they disagreed, you see, very, very fundamentally and very strongly.”

In lessons he taught at the Bible Training College and the Zeitoun camp in Egypt (which became the book *The Psychology of Redemption*), Oswald said, “If the mother of our Lord misunderstood Him, and His brethren did not believe in Him, the same things will happen to His life in us, and we must not think it strange concerning the misunderstandings of others. The life of the Son of God in us is brought into the same kind of circumstances that the historic life of Jesus Christ was brought into, and what was true of Him will be true also of His life in us.”

Clarence and Hannah Chambers on their fiftieth wedding anniversary, July 16, 1910. Franklin reported that Oswald “was always a great boy for his home and his Mother, she had a big influence on his life and his devotion to her increased as he grew older.” On her birthday in 1917, only weeks before his death, Oswald wrote, “All that formed my ideas of woman (and I have great ideas) is from you; all that entered (all unconsciously) into my conceptions of Motherhood and home-training, and comfort and sagacious sunshine, has been formed in me by you.”

In a September 26, 1906, letter to Hannah (whom he addressed as “My dear ‘brick’ of a Mother”), Oswald expressed appreciation for his parents’ support—even if they were sometimes bewildered by his choices:

If it is possible, I love you more than ever for being so robust and strong in your mind. Thank God for you and upon every remembrance of you. God surely has wonderfully answered your prayers for your children. The memory of Mother’s doings and managings are to me a growing stimulus and an amazement, while her detestation of cant and humbug also seems to have left in me no little of the same spirit. I, as your youngest son, see you both transfigured in the light of years and life. I thank God for you, and praise Him that neither of you ever offered any obstacle to my following out what appeared to me God’s calls, for the ways and turnings have perplexed you much, but, thank God, He has allowed you to live to see that when He leads all is well.

When he left home for his university studies, Oswald wrote, “I feel traits in my character I knew not of before and it causes me to bow in deeper gratitude for that home training which I have now left

for the training and discipline of life. Oh, what a mighty influence home life has on us! Indeed, we do not know how deep a debt we owe to our mothers and fathers and their training.”

