

*S*EARCHING FOR  
MRS. OSWALD CHAMBERS

*One Woman's Quest to  
Uncover the Truth about the Woman behind the  
Most Celebrated Devotional of All Time*

# Searching for Mrs. Oswald Chambers



MARTHA CHRISTIAN



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*Searching for Mrs. Oswald Chambers: One Woman's Quest to Uncover the Truth about the Woman behind the Most Celebrated Devotional of All Time*

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To

*K*athleen.

Righteousness  
will bring peace.  
Yes, it will bring  
quietness and  
confidence forever.

*ISALAH 32:17 (NLT)*

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## INTRODUCTION

*My Utmost for His Highest* is almost a household word in many Christian homes. Spoken into being during the early 1900s by Oswald Chambers, a man of great spiritual strength and stature, his words have comforted generations of souls seeking a closer walk with Jesus. O. C.'s faithfulness to his God, his purity of purpose that the answer lies with Jesus (not beliefs about Jesus), and his delightful way of explaining how to lay hold of the truths of God have instructed, informed, and inspired those who have come to meet the Christ who lived in Oswald Chambers.

Eager for spiritual growth, anxious for God to get me in his grip, and having heard of the godly wisdom in *My Utmost for His Highest*, I bought a copy of the book for myself.

Opening the front cover, the foreword caught my eye. Hurriedly, I scanned the page and noticed the initials *B. C.* located at the end. Like many others, I suppose, I glossed over those initials without a thought, immediately moving to the first page, marked "January 1."

A year passed, during which I studied the solid teachings of Oswald Chambers. Referring to my Bible often, I prayed to know God as he had known him, to come to realize that Jesus (not what I believed about Jesus) was the key to faith.

During that first year, I struggled, felt my shame at my slow growth and lack of charity, knew a joy that rose above life's problems, and looked forward to another year for more of the same.

When the time rolled around to begin a new year with *My Utmost for His Highest*, I again opened the book, but slowly this time. The foreword read, “It is because it is felt that the author is one to whose teaching men will return, that this book has been prepared, and it is sent out with the prayer that day by day the messages may continue to bring the quickening life and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.—B. C.”

Instead of hurrying ahead to the first page, “January 1,” I stopped dead in my tracks.

*Who was “B. C.”?*

## PROLOGUE

Women were important to Jesus. He honored them, set them free, and raised them to a high calling for their lives.

In a time when women were considered unimportant property, slaves to service, and items to be kept under lock and key in the back rooms of society, Jesus came.

Jesus loved and cared for his mother, Mary. The divine love and loyalty he demonstrated to his friends Mary and Martha during the illness and death of Lazarus lifted them, curing their crisis. Jesus bridged the chasm of racial discrimination when he spoke to the woman of Samaria. He broke the bondage of her life, offering her life eternal instead.

Jesus cared about women. He set the example of sacrificial love, to the point of his death on the cross, and he provided the path for women to be set free.

Oswald Chambers, best known for the words found in *My Utmost for His Highest* and often considered a spiritual giant and evangelical prophet, loved Bidley Chambers, his wife, with Christlike love. He cared for her, prayed for her, and joined his life with hers to serve God.

In 1916, he wrote a note to his wife saying, “When I consider how completely and nobly you have foregone all quiet civilised influences that other women have and have been living a literal hand-to-mouth existence all transfigured by your great love for me and Him, I must bow my head in dedication and say God bless thee!”

Bidley was clearly the kind of woman of whom the



book of Proverbs says, “Her husband praises her” (Proverbs 31:28, NLT).

These words from her husband must have caused Bidley’s spirit to soar above the trials of a life of physical hardship. That note, tucked under her pillow when her husband had to be away for a night, lightened her load by cheering her heart.

Already serving God, Bidley Chambers was lifted to the very throne of God by her husband. His love for her set her free to abandon her own life to the life of Christ in her.

She lived the powerful life of Christ’s love flowing through her to everyone around her.

One year after receiving that treasured note, Mrs. Oswald Chambers became a widow. The sudden death of her husband after only seven years of marriage left Bidley with a young daughter to raise alone, facing a future of uncertainty thousands of miles away from home. Bidley Chambers accepted these trials with the certainty of faith in Jesus Christ.

The Word spoke to her: “Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name: the righteous shall compass me about; for thou shalt deal bountifully with me” (Psalm 142:7, KJV).

Out of the bounty of God comes *Searching for Mrs. Oswald Chambers*.

—Martha Christian

*You must give some time to your fellow man.  
Even if it is a little thing, do something for those  
who have need of a man's help, something for  
which you get no pay but the privilege of doing it.  
For remember, you don't live in a world all your  
own. Your brothers are here, too.*

—ALBERT SCHWEITZER

## ONE

# Faith



ZEITOUN, EGYPT  
1917

*[Jesus] said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby."* JOHN 11:4, KJV

Biddy Chambers brushed a wisp of hair from her forehead and tried to grasp the events leading up to her husband's death. For a moment she sat alone on a rough wooden bench in the devotional hut in Zeitoun, Egypt. She could still see him speaking. Tired but relying on God's strength, he offered the light and hope of Jesus Christ night after night to war-weary soldiers who needed comfort during the terrible First World War.

The cross that marked his grave stated simply "Reverend Oswald Chambers, Superintendent, Y.M.C.A., 15<sup>TH</sup> November 1917, Age 43."

*Has it only been a week?* Biddy pushed down the tears that threatened.

She knew she had to go on. The soldiers, the volunteers, and their faithful friends believed her to be strong. They were used to her steady stride, her infectious laugh, her generosity, and her ability to endure the desert heat. Other than her long, dusty skirts and windblown hair, her tidy appearance was always the current fashion of high-neck collars, and her brown hair was swept up away from her face and piled on top of her head. Even in the driving wind and blowing sand, Bidley Chambers remained an English lady.

Looking around the familiar hut, she could hardly realize Oswald Chambers was gone. When he was alive, she hadn't noticed the irregular, rough surfaces of the walls. Did the end of his life mean that the work was over? "We need him," she whispered to the empty room.

Bidley remembered how Oswald had always comforted her: "Poverty in brain and body and heart is blessed if it drives us to his fathomless resources."

It was true. But sometimes, through the long hours of work involved in feeding soldiers and caring for their daughter, Kathleen, Mrs. Oswald Chambers felt overwhelmed, even when her husband was beside her.

"Mrs. O. C.?" The voice seemed to come from a long way off.

"Yes? Oh, yes, what is it?" Bidley stood and turned to smile at the soldier, whose face wore an expression of deep loss. He held his hat in his hands.

"Will you be talking to us tonight, then?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, I will."

"Thank you, then." The war-weary Australian looked much older than his twenty years. Grief does that to people. "I'll see you then."

"See you then," Bidley replied. Oswald was in the pres-

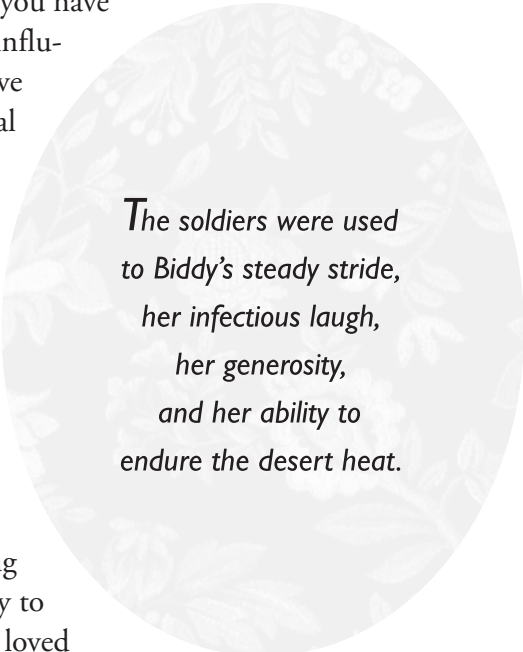
ence of God. He would want her to continue the work in Egypt. She had to “do the next thing.”

“What were Oswald’s words to me?” She tried to recapture the sound of his voice, but she could not.

She did, however, have something he had written to her not long after they arrived in Egypt: “When I consider how completely and nobly you have foregone all quiet civilised influences that other women have and have been living a literal hand-to-mouth existence all transfigured by your great love for me and Him, I must bow my head in dedication and say God bless thee!”

How could she, a young widow thousands of miles away from her home country of England, carry on the work of helping people? What would she say to the assembled soldiers who loved her husband’s message of God’s order in the midst of chaos? “God’s order in the haphazard,” she said aloud. Her head felt heavy, and her shoulders sagged. Her heartbreak seemed too great to endure. As if living a bad dream, she sank down on the wooden bench and pressed her fingers to her forehead.

Biddy knew that God’s grace was sufficient. His Word had spoken to her and sustained her through the days of Oswald’s illness. *“This sickness is not unto death, but for*



*The soldiers were used  
to Biddy’s steady stride,  
her infectious laugh,  
her generosity,  
and her ability to  
endure the desert heat.*

*the glory of God*” was the message she felt God was telling her.

She could continue because God’s Word said, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee. . . . Be strong and of a good courage” (Joshua 1:5-6, KJV). Biddy reached for her ever-present notepad and quickly wrote down that promise.

“Mama?” Little Kathleen was suddenly standing beside her. Her daughter’s faith in God gave her strength and comfort. Kathleen did not question God or his way. She believed Jesus always knew best.

Biddy put her arm around her daughter and pulled her close.

“Yes?”

“What does ‘scallyway’ mean?” Kathleen patted Biddy’s arm.

Mrs. Oswald Chambers smiled. “Our Little Flower of God,” she whispered against her four-year-old’s soft hair. Biddy pulled Kathleen onto her lap. “First of all, it is pronounced ‘ska-li-wag.’” She bounced her little one on her knee.

“Why did Daddy call me that?”

“Because he loved you very much.”

“But what does it *mean*?”

“It means it is time to get some supper ready. How many guests do you think we will have tonight?”

“Lots. We always do!” Kathleen hopped onto the rough floor.

“Well, then, go wash your face and tidy your hair. Your ribbon is all lopsided.” Biddy gave her daughter a gentle push toward the door.

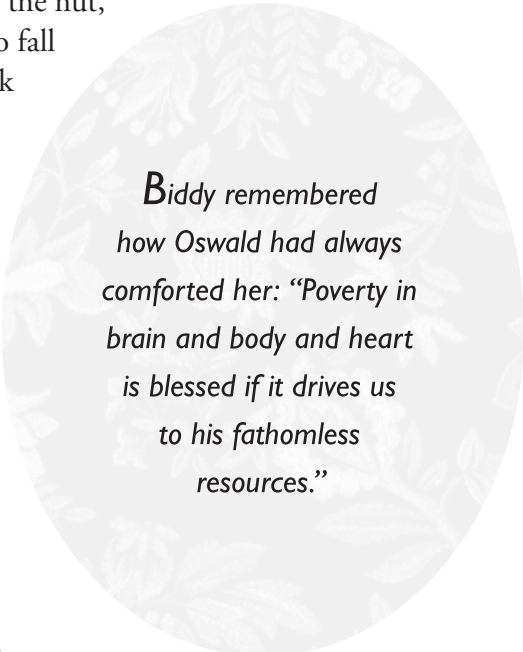
Suddenly serious, Kathleen turned questioning eyes toward her mother. “If Daddy is with God, how can he be here, too?”

The question tore through Biddy like a knife. Standing up, she straightened her long skirt and said softly, “We’ll talk about that later, but it is possible.” She smiled. “With God, all things are possible.”

Mrs. O. C. was a good mother: strong, kind, and happy. She would not fail her daughter. “I’ll be along in a minute.”

Once Kathleen had left the hut, Biddy allowed a few tears to fall and then noticed a fly whisk on the reading table next to her. *Was this the one he always carried?*

She constantly fought with the insect population. The flies were especially annoying. Now Oswald would no longer surprise her by suddenly swatting them. She picked up the whisk and put it in a safe place.



**B**iddy remembered how Oswald had always comforted her: “Poverty in brain and body and heart is blessed if it drives us to his fathomless resources.”

Later, with dinner over and “Scallyway” Kathleen put to bed for the night, Biddy returned to the empty devotional hut. She felt restless. She had managed to give a message of hope to the men who longed for home and family and who might die on the battlefield the very next morning.

Biddy recalled how she had approached the place where the soldiers sat on wooden benches. She had spoken to them outside in the open air that night because of the desert heat. As she walked over to them, she had prayed

quietly for God to be her strength and shield. Then, taking a deep breath, she straightened her skirt, walked briskly to where Oswald would have stood, and looked at her audience. The love of God flowed through her eyes to them, and she spoke from her heart: “When Jesus said to believe in him, it might seem like climbing a high tower where one must hang on or fall. But in reality, to believe in Jesus means we have a place of strength, and joy, and security. Belief *in* Jesus, not beliefs *about* Jesus, is what Oswald would have told you if he were here tonight. We have to go forward. As we trust God for each day, he will give us the provision of strength. We can be at peace because the light of Jesus Christ will lead us toward that perfect day when there are no more wars, or rumours of wars, and where the lamb will lie down with the lion.”

There in the hut alone, Biddy recalled the meeting that night and how she had watched their faces at full attention.

“It was as if a veil had been drawn aside,” she said softly.

The years at Zeitoun, Egypt, where Oswald had offered all he had out of his love for God, would have lasting impact, because God’s Word would endure forever.

And Biddy knew without a doubt that Oswald’s solid foundation of teaching faith in God was not wasted when he spoke the words from Philippians 2:17: “If I be offered up on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy and rejoice with you all” (KJV).

Oswald had not doubted God, his methods, or his way. An eagerness to do God’s will, as God made it clear, would carry those boys through the days in this life.

*And maybe by tomorrow, she thought, into the next life.* Her heart ached not only for her husband but also for the



young men, many still in their teen years, who would face the ultimate test on the battlefield—death.

Holding the Bible Oswald had loved brought her comfort. Touching the books he read gave her a sense of peace. Finally alone, and away from eyes that tried to search her soul, she gathered her thoughts.

She was surrounded by people who counted on her now, as they had counted on Oswald ever since he had arrived in Egypt. *Was it three years ago?* Bidy tried to keep her mind from wandering.

“How can anyone be so alone?” She spoke quietly. One of the things she missed most was sharing the events of the day with her husband. How they had laughed together!

It had seemed to happen suddenly, his sickness, but then, time ran together just now. One day he was fine, walking briskly around the compound. The next, he was not feeling well. Then he had stomach pain. “Probably nothing,” he had assured her. “Just something I ate. Your cooking,” he teased, and he gave her a hug. But when he could barely get out of bed, even stoic Oswald knew something was wrong.

“Should you go to hospital?” Bidy tried to keep her tone light and her manner offhand.

“The hospital is needed for the wounded,” he replied. “I just need a bit of rest.”

Gizeh Red Cross Hospital was next, however. Bidy had trusted God while the doctors removed her husband’s appendix. Since the men back at the camp in Zeitoun were busy praying for Oswald’s recovery, she had accepted it when the medical team said the surgery was a success.

A noise outside the hut startled her, and in spite of herself, Bidy jumped. Fanning her face, she reasoned, *Nothing at all.*

“Nothing at all” was what she thought would be the

outcome of Oswald's hospital stay. Still, she had stayed with her husband at the hospital and watched over him. And she prayed.

Biddy had clung to the words from John 11:4: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby" (KJV). The familiar verse of Scripture seemed deeply impressed on her soul as she went through the long, weary days of Oswald's illness.

Now, however, sitting alone in the hut, she was uncertain. Oswald was needed, not only by the war-weary soldiers but by others, too. "I need him," she sighed. This time the tears flowed freely.

*How is it, then, she thought, that he died?*

Biddy knew the medical diagnosis—a blood clot in the lung. Then another blood clot formed, and she watched Oswald fade before her eyes. More prayer.

Oswald had miraculously improved, and little Kathleen was allowed to visit him.

Weak as he was, Oswald had opened his eyes and said, "Hello, Scalawag."

"That's where she heard 'scallyway.' Now I remember." Thinking out loud brought him closer.

He didn't look like himself because he had lost so much weight, but Kathleen didn't seem to notice.

How could Biddy ever forget the way her husband had tried to smile when Kathleen told him all about her donkey back at the Y.M.C.A. camp at Zeitoun?

The visit had ended all too soon.

Biddy knew Oswald was in God's presence. She realized that God was in control, but now she faced a future of uncertainty as a widow and as a single mother in a time when

women were usually protected by their husbands—or left to deteriorate on their own.

Biddy tiptoed to the sleeping quarters to check on her daughter. Kathleen didn't stir when Biddy fixed her bed-covers and removed her favorite doll from her grasp. Unable to rest, she walked slowly back to the devotional hut. She could feel God's Spirit there, but she could not breach the barrier between heaven and earth.

Picking up Oswald's Bible again, she sank onto a hard chair. "Now he is gone. I must face it."

Biddy knew that history would record his passing as November 15, 1917, at the age of forty-three. She did not realize, however, that her own life would have an impact on future generations, even into the twenty-first century and beyond. The grave was temporary. The impact of a life of service to Jesus Christ is eternal.

Oswald had often mentioned that, rightly related to Jesus Christ, one life could be of great service to God. Biddy was unaware that hers would be one of those lives.

She opened the Bible and read, "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name: the righteous shall compass me about, for thou shalt deal bountifully with me" (Psalm 142:7, KJV).

The Word spoke. Biddy Chambers listened.

## EPILOGUE

In my diary I wrote the following: “Biddy Chambers trusted God. Because she trusted God, millions of her husband’s words have found their way into sorrowing souls to take root and grow into a very personal relationship with Jesus Christ. She wrote our way to peace.”

For us, as believers in Jesus Christ, there is no end. We’ll see each other again.

I can hardly wait.

# NOTES

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2. I am indebted to the Wesley Center Online, Northwest Nazarene University, Nampa, ID 83686 for permission to quote from Ian M. Randall, “The Pentecostal League of Prayer: A Transdenominational British Wesleyan-Holiness Movement,” *Wesleyan Theological*