

## Oswald Chambers

### A Legacy of Light, Part Four

*Luke 11:13*

In 1890, a 15 year old young man and his father were walking home from a meeting where they'd just heard Charles Spurgeon preach. The young man said to his father as they walked along that he would have gladly given himself to the Lord had the opportunity been given. The boy's father responded, "You can do it now, my boy."

They stopped there on the path and prayed together.

This young man was Oswald Chambers. He would later join a Baptist church in London and eventually enter art school – determined to be an artist, a poet and a musician for life.

Three years later he felt that he should study for the ministry and so he abandoned his art studies and enrolled at the Dunoon Training College in Scotland. He did so well academically that he was invited to remain as a tutor, following his graduation.

However, it was during this period of time he entered into what he would later call "the dark night of his soul" . . . a time of doubting and discouragement over his lackluster spirituality – a disconnect from what we would call a personal relationship with Christ.

He tried in vain to arrive at some sort of sanctified state of self-satisfaction. A state his Pentecostal friends referred to as the mountain top of victory.

He would write a poem about that period in his life that included these lyrics:

*O Lord Jesus, hear my crying  
For a consecrated life.  
For I bite the dust in trying  
For release from this dark strife.<sup>i</sup>*

That dark period ended with a personal commitment and surrender to God's Spirit – something Oswald referred to as a baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Oswald was simply borrowing the vocabulary of his association with the Holiness and Pentecostal movements. While he didn't speak in tongues, in fact, he decried any attempt to prove that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was the same thing as speaking in tongues, he was no doubt influenced in his early days by these movements.

For a brief period of time he represented The Prayer League – a ministry funded by the early holiness movement in England.

Warren Wiersbe, writing of Oswald's experience, sifting through what happened to him in more biblical terminology, implies that Oswald may have been nothing more than genuinely converted at this time.<sup>ii</sup>

He eventually enrolled at the University of Edinburgh to prepare for ministry. While there he was deeply influenced by the preaching and ministry of Alexander Whyte – a preacher cut from the same granite as Charles Spurgeon.<sup>iii</sup>

So Oswald Chambers was influenced early in by the gospel preaching of Charles Spurgeon; alerted to the need for total surrender to the Holy Spirit by Pentecostal friends; and tutored from the pulpit by Alexander Whyte.

And that wasn't all – he would later be influenced by D. L. Moody's life and ministry through an organization that Oswald would join as a Chaplain – he would effectively become a foreign missionary, serving with the YMCA.

And you had no idea that the YMCA used to send out missionaries!

In fact, I thought you might be interested in this – let me read the YMCA Paris resolution, written in 1855 as the movement organized around a two-fold purpose: and I quote, “To unite young men who, regarding Jesus Christ as their God and Savior according to the Holy Scripture, desire to be His disciples in their doctrine and in their life, and to (secondly) to associate their efforts for the extension of His Kingdom among young men.”<sup>iv</sup>

For some time, before joining the YMCA, Oswald actually toured the world, preaching as an itinerate evangelist. His tour would take him to primarily to America and Japan for some 10 years.

When he was in his early 30’s, on one particular passage to America, he was asked by Christian friends to keep an eye on a young lady her friends nicknamed, “Biddy”, because she was traveling alone to America in search of work.

He was only happy to oblige her concerned friends . . . and he did keep an eye on her – in fact he married her 24 months later so that he could permanently keep an eye on her.

Their union, in 1910 would ultimately create a ministry which neither one of them could have possibly dreamed would ever take place.

Biddy happened to be a trained and skillful stenographer – she could record words at the rate of 250 a minute and she began recording everything Oswald taught and preached.

A few years later, Chambers became convinced that a Bible college was needed in England that would emphasize both a personal relationship with Christ and academic excellence.

The school began and operated on the principle of faith. In fact, the Bible College was never more than a month away from having to close for lack of funds.

Just to show you how committed Oswald was to praying and receiving whatever the Lord wanted to provide, when a wealthy friend once offered to completely endow the Bible College, Oswald responded, “No thank you – because, if you do that, the school might go on longer than God wants.”<sup>v</sup>

Little wonder that Oswald Chambers failed to perfectly fit in with the religious conventions of his day.

In fact, he was nicknamed, The Apostle of the Haphazard. His ministry path seemed erratic to many – his life plan wasn’t ironed out and smooth.

He went from one adventure of faith to another without as much of a worry.

In fact, in 1915, when World War 1 broke out, he struggled to remain at his Bible College in England and wanted to serve on the fields, close to the action.

But he wasn’t too impetuous to yield to the Holy Spirit. He prayed, “Lord, I praise you for this place I am in, but the wonder has begun to stir in me – is this Your place for me? It may be only restlessness . . . so hold me steady doing your will . . . calm me that I sin not against Your will.”<sup>vi</sup>

One year later he became convinced that God wanted him overseas – so he took Biddy and their little girl with him as they set up camp as a YMCA chaplain to the troops, stationed at a military base just outside Cairo, Egypt.

Oswald Chambers suspended the Bible College indefinitely and left with his family for Egypt.

When he arrived to join the other missionaries, everything changed.

Among other changes, he informed the other YMCA workers that they would immediately abandon weekly movies and concerts for Bible Classes. He was going to begin teaching the soldiers the Bible.

All the other workers predicted the soldiers would leave in a mass exodus from the wooden YMCA building – or hut, as it was called – built in the military camp.

In his lengthy biography, which I read a few years ago, Chambers found the whole situation intriguing. Cairo assaulted his physical senses with enticing aromas from street-side Cafés and the eerie Muslim calls to prayer from countless minarets. Spiritually, the challenge of taking the gospel to several thousand men in a busy military camp seemed almost staggering.<sup>vii</sup>

But here he came.

And instead of a mass exodus, there was an awakening. It wasn’t long before several hundred soldiers packed into the YMCA hut to listen to his thought provoking, humor punctuated biblical messages.<sup>viii</sup>

He also began a weekly prayer meeting that was predicted to fail as well. It began with 2 other men, but soon grew to fill the hut.

Because so many of these men knew they would never return home alive, the gospel became the water of living hope; prayer became their only source of strength.

It wasn't long before Oswald Chamber's key verse became known to the entire camp. He had a banner created with **Luke 11:13** stretching the width of the platform. Everyone was confronted with that text throughout Oswald Chamber's ministry.

***"How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to that ask Him."***

Let's look for a few minutes at Oswald Chamber's signature ministry verse – ***Luke's gospel and chapter 11.***

You can only imagine how much these soldiers wanted to know if God heard their prayers and if God cared.

In the carnage of World War 1, the question would have been what kind of prayer makes it through to God?

The disciples had the same question. In fact, notice **verse 1**. ***It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray . . ."***

By the way, the disciples never asked Jesus to teach them how to walk on water . . . how to silence a storm or how to feed thousands of people with a handful of bread and fish.

No . . . ***Lord, teach us how to pray.***

And the Lord responds over the next few verses by giving us the Disciples Prayer – although the church calls it, The Lord's Prayer.

Following this instruction the Lord anticipated the very next question on the hearts of the disciples to be – does God the Father really answer prayer?

And so Jesus created one of His amazing stories to prove an important point – notice **verse 5**. ***Then He said to them, "suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves – three pieces of flat bread – for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey and I have nothing to set before him."***

Make sure you don't miss the fact that you're going over to your friend's house at **midnight**.

Not exactly the most convenient time to knock on your neighbor's door.

Now in this culture, traveling at night wasn't unusual during hot weather. And without warning, you just might get a visitor who arrives – **at midnight**.

In this culture, hospitality was considered a social duty – particularly in Israel – so now you've got a dilemma on your hands.

You don't have anything to feed your guest!

I remember learning something about hospitality. Growing up in a missionary home, it seemed like someone was always visiting in our home.

Many a night I gave up my bedroom for a traveling missionary or preacher or guest. My mother always seemed to have meals ready – food seemed to miraculously appear. I had no idea that she kept meals waiting in the freezer for that next surprise guest.

Marsha and I had been married for just a couple of months and I was just beginning my seminary training. One Sunday night, who would show up to our church but a missionary couple that I knew from my past. So after church I asked them where they were eating supper and they said they didn't have any plans, so I said, "Why don't you come over to our apartment for dinner."

They were thrilled.

They followed us home in their car, and on the way, Marsha was looking straight ahead because they were behind us, but she was talking to me. She was saying, "Honey, we don't have anything to eat . . . the cupboard is bare and I planned to go get some groceries after work tomorrow. We don't have any food for dinner."

That wasn't all she said, but that's all you need to know. She was sweet about it.

Then she said, "Wait, I've got a head of lettuce and some cheese . . . and she whipped up a Caesar salad fit for royalty."

After dinner I made the mistake of asking this couple, "So where are you guys staying tonight?" They said, "We don't have any plans."

Marsha actually insisted they sleep in our one bedroom apartment and she and I made a pallet on the floor in the living room. I was going to be sleeping out there anyway, so this was an improvement.

The lesson I learned was, "don't invite anybody over for dinner without checking with your wife to see if we have anything to eat."

The lesson here in this story is, "You're stuck with an overnight guest and you don't have a choice! Ah, but your neighbor was baking bread earlier that afternoon and you know you're only hope is to ask them for some of it."

But here's this dilemma – you can either be a bad host and send your guest to bed hungry, or you can be a bad neighbor by going next door and waking up that family.<sup>ix</sup>

Notice verse 7. *But from inside he (your neighbor) answers and says, “Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I – that is, our family, is already in bed.”*

Bed for them was a mat on the floor where the entire family usually slept.

Further, in the villages of Christ’s day it was customary to bring into their homes at night their chickens and goats so they wouldn’t be stolen in the night.

For someone to get up at midnight would awaken the entire family and a bunch of animals along with them.

No wonder he says, “Go away.”

Jesus effectively says in *verse 8* that the neighbor finally gets up and gives you bread, not because he’s your friend, but because you’re going to wake everybody up anyway if he doesn’t help you.

Now unfortunately, the average Christian thinks this story proves the point that you gotta keep knocking on heaven’s door before God will answer you.

That God only answers the prayers of the persistent.

Now obviously there is something to be said about persistence in prayer – we effectively pray without ceasing (*1 Thessalonians 5:17*).

But this is not the point Jesus is making at all.

*Verse 9. So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you – just ask. Seek and you’ll find; knock and guess what – God’s door will be opened to you, guaranteed.*

The point of this story is not one of comparison between God and this sleepy, irritated neighbor – it isn’t a story of **comparison**, it’s a story of **contrast**.

God isn’t like this sleepy neighbor at all.

Come to Him anytime and His door is open.

In fact, look at the way Jesus reinforces that with *verse 11. Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he?* Implied answer is – of course not! *12. Of if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? 13. If you then, being evil – I think this word is rooted in the Old Testament words for flesh and blood (basar vadam); in other words, here’s the point – if fathers, who are flesh and blood – mortal creatures – treat their children better than that, imagine how your immortal Father-God treats His children!*<sup>f</sup>

*Notice verse 13b – if you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your*

*heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit – that is, the best gift of all – to those who ask Him?*

Again, this doesn’t absolve us from intensity and discipline in prayer – but it does mean this – you are not wringing from God the Father’s unwilling hands the things you really need – in fact, you are going to your Heavenly Father and He knows what you need already and your greatest need just so happens to be Himself.<sup>xi</sup>

It may not be the answer we wanted or expected, but whatever arrives, comes from the open and giving and gracious Hand of our Sovereign God who gives us the Holy Spirit so that we can handle whatever the answer is.

I love the way one author summarized this lesson from Jesus:

- You ask for a gift and God the Father gives you the Giver;
- You ask for a product and He gives you the Source;
- You ask for comfort and He gives you the Comforter;
- You come seeking power and He gives you the source of power;
- You need help and He gives you the Helper;
- You’re seeking answers and He gives you the indwelling Spirit of truth.<sup>xii</sup>

Oswald Chambers would say this about prayer, “[Prayer] is deliberate confidence in the character of God whose ways you may not understand at the time.”

He also said, “The life of faith is not so much one of mounting up with wings as eagles, as it is a life of walking . . . faith never knows where it is being led, but it loves and knows the One who is leading.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Now, unlike his spiritual mentors which included, Charles Spurgeon, D.L. Moody and Alexander Whyte, Oswald Chambers would remain virtually unheard of – virtually obscure – during his lifetime.

In fact, he once said to a friend, “I feel I shall be buried for a time, hidden away in obscurity; then suddenly I shall flame out, do my work, and be gone.”<sup>xiv</sup>

In a way that was exactly what happened.

After less than 24 months of ministry in Egypt, Chambers developed appendicitis. He resisted going to a hospital on the grounds that the beds were needed by men wounded in battle.

Eventually, as his condition became critical, on October 29<sup>th</sup>, a surgeon performed an emergency appendectomy . . . for a few weeks his life hung in the balance and then seemed to revive, only to suffer from hemorrhaging in his lungs.

Then on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1917, less than 2 years after arriving in Egypt for ministry that seemed so amazingly blessed by God's Spirit, to the utter shock of his wife, family and supporting friends, and the men he served, Oswald Chambers died.

He was only 43 years of age.

An obscure missionary outpost near Cairo, Egypt – teaching hut full of soldiers; yet, his life would eventually impact literally millions of Christians over the next several generations and it isn't over yet.

It came from the hard work of his wife's note taking.

After his death, Bidy and their daughter eventually returned home and then, sensing the Lord's will in the matter, took out all her notes from his sermons and lessons, notes she'd taken in shorthand as he had preached and taught over at the Bible College, in Japan, in America and in Egypt.

From what she was able to take down, edit and publish, the world would eventually hear from Oswald Chambers.

To this day, his messages continue to provide wise, personal, challenging, homespun biblical wisdom on so many subjects.

Let me provide a few comments regarding just a few subjects.

### **1. First, his encouragement regarding books**

Like Spurgeon before him, he encouraged his students to read widely. Spurgeon once said that a man who doesn't read will never be read; a teacher who never quotes, will never be quoted.

Likewise, Oswald Chambers was a voracious reader and his lessons were sprinkled with the quotes of others.

On one occasion, he said this, "When people refer to a man as a man of one Book – the Bible – he is generally found to be a man of a multitude of books, which simply allows to one Book – the Bible – to be brought to its proper grandeur."<sup>xv</sup>

He would also say, "Books are available counselors and preachers, always at hand, having this advantage over verbal teachers – they are ready to repeat their lesson as often as we please."<sup>xvi</sup>

### **2. Secondly, his attitude toward details and administration are worth noting**

Chambers believed that every detail mattered. He was always trying to improve the look of the huts and tents used by the YMCA.

He was quoted as saying, "A grave defect in much work of today is that we do not follow Solomon's admonition to do everything with all your might. The tendency, is to argue, "But it's only for so short a time, why trouble with it? If it is only for five minutes, let it be done well."<sup>xvii</sup>

You might think that with this kind of attitude he'd be someone you'd want to avoid.

### **3. Actually, his example in life regarding humor and a joyful spirit are also worth noting.**

He loved to laugh.

And he did something fairly novel in that he expected his audience to laugh at times as well – and he would laugh along.

One man complained to his wife about Oswald's incessant humor. He actually wrote a letter to Mrs. Chambers in which he said, "Your husband is the most irreverent Reverend I've ever met!"<sup>xviii</sup>

I mean, what kind of missionary tells his audience – and I quote Chambers – "Keep praying and playing and being yourself."<sup>xix</sup>

Not exactly your typical message.

Often his humor disarmed people and drove home his point – he said once, "Have we actually gotten in the way of allowing God to work; or are we so amazingly important that we really wonder what the Almighty does before we get up in the morning!"

Oswald would encourage his students with this wonderful advice – "Never make a principle out of your own experience; let God be as original with other people as He is with you."

Oswald Chambers was definitely an original.

Oswald wrote in his journal, "Lord, keep me radiantly and joyously Thine."<sup>xx</sup>

### **4. A fourth subject worth commenting on was Oswald Chamber's counsel regarding decision making.**

He simply said it this way: trust God and do the next thing.

In other words, “make sure you’re walking with God – and if you are, don’t hesitate to do whatever the next thing on your plate happens to be.”

And with that counsel, Chamber’s took away so much of the mystery of God’s will.

Trust God . . . then, with confidence and joy, do the next thing you want to do.

He would be quoted by his wife as teaching it this way; “The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else; but if you do not fear God you will fear everything else.”<sup>xxi</sup>

I found it interesting that Oswald once said that the only lasting preaching is preaching with a pen.

Yet he never wrote one book.

Even though there are some 30 books with his name as the author, including his famous devotional

entitled *My Utmost for His Highest* –they were all pieced together by Bidy Chambers.

*My Utmost for His Highest* has now sold in the millions of copies – it’s been translated into 39 languages – and counting.

In fact, when Bidy Chambers died in 1966, she was involved in the latest edition of *My Utmost for His Highest*.

After Bidy’s death, their daughter took up the work and was involved in even more writing projects using her father’s material until she too passed away in 1997.

They followed Oswald Chambers advice . . . pray for God’s wisdom through His Spirit . . . trust Him . . . and then do the next thing.

Whatever it might be that God wants you to do.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/13/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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ii Warren W. Wiersbe, *50 People Every Christian Should Know* (Baker Books, 2009), p. 321

iii [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald\\_Chambers](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oswald_Chambers)

iv David McCasland, *Oswald Chambers: Abandoned to God* (Discovery House, 1993), p. 214

v Adapted from Wiersbe, p. 321

vi adapted from [www.oswaldchambers.co.uk.bio.html](http://www.oswaldchambers.co.uk.bio.html)

vii McCasland, p. 214

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ix John MacArthur, *Luke 11-17* (Moody Publishers, 2013), p. 54

x Craig A. Evans, *Luke* (Baker Books, 1990), p. 183

xi William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 146

xii Adapted from MacArthur, p. 57

xiii *Life Application Bible: Hebrews* (Tyndale, 1997), p. 182

xiv Wiersbe, p. 320

xv Adapted from McCasland, p. 159

xvi [www.ccel.org/ccel/chambers.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/chambers.html)

xvii McCasland, p. 247

xviii Wiersbe, p. 323

xix Ibid

xx Ibid

xxi Oswald Chambers in *The Highest Good*, quoted in *Christianity Today*, Volume 39, no. 1