

*Mrs. Oswald
Chambers*



The Woman behind the
World's Bestselling Devotional

MICHELLE ULE



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Michelle Ule, *Mrs. Oswald Chambers*
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2017. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2017 by Michelle Ule

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ule, Michelle Duval, author.

Title: Mrs. Oswald Chambers : the woman behind the world's bestselling devotional / Michelle Ule.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017018731 | ISBN 9780801075148 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Chambers, Bidy, 1884–1966. | Chambers, Oswald, 1874–1917—Family. | Evangelists' spouses—Great Britain—Biography.

Classification: LCC BR1725.C43 U44 2017 | DDC 269/.2092 [B] —dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017018731>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

All quotations from *My Utmost for His Highest* are taken from the classic edition.

The author is represented by Books & Such Literary Management.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Michelle Ule, Mrs. Oswald Chambers
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2017. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

With gratitude to all who have encouraged, loved,
and taught me in my Christian walk:
teachers, pastors, Bible study members,
authors, and praying friends

As well as
my children, grandchildren, and husband

And
to the memory of
Biddy and Oswald Chambers

Soli Deo Gloria



Contents

- Prologue: Faith and Experience (November 13, 1908) 9
1. Discovering Divine Designs: 1883–1907 13
 2. The Spontaneity of Love: 1907–8 25
 3. The Secret of the Lord: 1908–10 33
 4. Building for Eternity: 1911–12 42
 5. Vision: 1913 55
 6. The Baffling Call of God: 1914–15 67
 7. The Undetected Sacredness of Circumstances: 1915 79
 8. The Determination to Serve: 1916 91
 9. The Destitution of Service: 1916 102
 10. The Teaching of Adversity: 1917 114
 11. What Is That to Thee? November 1917 125
 12. The Fires of Sorrow: 1918 149
 13. Sublime Intimacy: 1919–20 161
 14. Isn't There Some Misunderstanding? 1921–29 174
 15. The Worker's Ruling Passion: 1929–39 188
 16. The Teaching of Adversity: 1939–46 200

Contents

17. Yes—But . . . ! 1946–60 211
18. Undaunted Radiance: 1961–66 218

Acknowledgments 225

Appendix: Biddy Chambers and the Writing of *My Utmost
for His Highest*, 1924–27 229

Notes 235

Bibliography 249

About the Author 251

Prologue

Faith and Experience (November 13, 1908)

How can anyone who is identified with Jesus Christ suffer from doubt or fear?¹

*T*he cathedral loomed as they exited the tube station into a crisp November morning in 1908. Gertrude Hobbs's blue eyes twinkled at Oswald Chambers from beneath her black straw hat as she took his arm. "You want to show me St. Paul's?"

The morning light shadowed his high cheekbones. "Have you been here before, Beloved Disciple Biddy?"

She loved to hear him use his new nickname for her. "Of course I have."

He patted her hand. "There's something new inside I want to show you."

They strolled past the booksellers' warehouses to the western face of England's "mother church." The cathedral sat on the highest spot in London and showcased the city's tallest spire, pointing to God. Twenty-four broad stone steps brought them to the entrance.

The morning was a gift; they had so little opportunity to spend time with each other. Their affection had developed during a

ten-day voyage to America, a few quick visits in New York City, and many exchanged letters. Biddy had quit her job in New York and returned to England because of his words.

Finally reunited, they only had the weekend in London. Oswald would leave within days to speak at League of Prayer meetings in Ireland, northern England, and Scotland. They didn't know when they'd meet again.

Written words sustained and nourished their hearts, always, but that Friday morning Oswald directed Biddy to an oil painting not far from the glorious dome. She'd read about it in the newspaper. "The sermon in a frame?"

Holman Hunt's painting "The Light of the World" depicted Jesus dressed in kingly robes in a dark garden, a lighted lantern in one hand, the other stretched to knock on a humble wooden door without a knob.

Revelation 3:20 had inspired the painting: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

Evangelists recognized the painting as a clarion call to show how Jesus awaits invitation into each person's heart. Oswald indicated the crown of thorns Jesus wore, and they discussed the painting before he explained why he wanted her to see it.

Oswald needed Biddy to understand that if she married him, their home would be meager, with their lives "going heart and soul into literary and itinerating work for Him. It will be hard and glorious and arduous."²

Biddy knew marriage to Oswald would not be a relationship focused on each other. God's call commanded Oswald's time and attention. She viewed her role in partnership with him and God as a helpmeet—a woman specifically designed for Oswald's needs and God's purposes.

Her beloved painted no romantic pictures. Indeed, Oswald cautioned, "I have nothing to offer you but my love and steady lavish service for Him."³

Prologue

Captivated by her faith in God and the man before her, Bidy agreed. Before the Hunt painting, Oswald and Bidy promised to follow God's lead together and to give their utmost energies to accomplish God's highest plans.

But what kind of woman would accept such a challenging proposal?

1



Discovering Divine Designs

1883–1907

Never allow that the haphazard is anything less than God's appointed order.¹

The fog would gather quietly in the moist winter night above London's Thames River. Born of cold air, the murky cloudiness would deepen and thicken as it moved over the water toward land. It would then crawl up the riverbanks north and south and cloak feeble gas streetlamps struggling to push back the dark.

As dawn broke and the sun rose, the fog and coal smoke mixture—first called “smog” in 1905—would turn yellowish brown with a smoky, acidic smell. For young and old people suffering from inflamed lungs or fragile hearts, the sooty particulates swelled air passages and gripped chests.

One such winter's day in 1895, the smog wisped through the massive Royal Arsenal walls ten miles east of Big Ben on the Thames. It drifted by the Royal Army barracks and slipped along

Woolwich's narrow streets to a townhouse set behind a flower garden: #4 Bowater Crescent.

The smog's microscopic particles slid under the door and found twelve-year-old Gertrude Annie Hobbs. Her lungs seized into air-sucking spasms.

She struggled to climb the stairs to the bedroom she shared with her sixteen-year-old sister, Dais. Her congested chest weighed heavy, and she could not catch her breath even when she lay down. Weariness plagued her, and schoolwork, even the literature she loved, blurred into bewilderment. Gert closed her aching eyes to rest, yet her mind raced.

At first her mother thought Gert must have caught the type of cold virus most people endured in a Victorian England of sodden handkerchiefs and close rooms. In an era before antibiotics and asthma inhalers, effective treatments were limited. Emily Hobbs pumped up her daughter's pillows, steamed the room with a boiling kettle, and prayed.

Henry Hobbs returned from the gas works that evening and stared at his youngest child, her wan features a mirror of his exhaustion. Her rattled breathing and dark-circled eyes troubled him. The son of a master baker, Henry had seen many men laboring to breathe flour-choked air in the bakery kitchen. His own father gasped for breath a mile away in his home on Powis Street.²

They called the doctor. Tapping on Gert's chest and listening, he diagnosed bronchitis, a viral inflammation of the lungs now known to be exacerbated by air pollution.

Physicians in the 1890s prescribed opium or morphine for bronchitis, along with an expectorant to clear the lungs. Emily fed her child wintergreen drops to soothe the searing coughs. She pushed her lips into a reassuring smile as she listened to Gert's wheezing and watched the girl's red-cheeked attempts to take a deep breath.

Eleven thousand people in greater London died of bronchitis in 1895.³

But not Gertrude Annie Hobbs.

The smog eased in the spring when household chimneys belched less smoke. Migrating birds returned, flowers pushed through the warm soil, and Gert's lungs cleared. She returned to school behind in her studies. Nineteenth-century teachers emphasized rote memory work, which made it harder to keep up outside of class, but in her quest to be perfect, Gert tried.



The blue-eyed girl with wavy dark hair who had languished during the winter months blossomed in the summer as she played tennis with Dais and their mother. She resumed piano lessons, cavorted with the family dog, and rode her bicycle in nearby Woolwich Commons. The family sang hymns around the piano in the evenings. They read aloud and laughed together. The tension eased from Henry's shoulders and Emily set aside her fears.

A cheerful woman, Emily Hobbs combined her fondness for entertaining and playing tennis by hosting frequent tennis parties. Emily handled the cooking and baking while employing a live-in teenage servant to help with the rough work. Like her daughters, she cherished books and, thankfully for all, Woolwich boasted several lending libraries. While deeply in love with her hardworking husband, Emily delighted in her three clever children: Edith Mary (called Dais—short for Daisy), born in 1879, Herbert (called Bert), born in 1881, and Gertrude (called Gert), born in 1883.

The Hobbs children grew up during the final two decades of Queen Victoria's reign. Bowater Crescent rang with cadences from the nearby barracks and the hoofbeats of military and civilian mounts headed south to Woolwich Common. Soldiers attached to the Royal Regiment of Artillery frequented the neighborhood as they marched to the Royal Arsenal.

The 150-acre Royal Arsenal stretched for a mile along the Thames waterfront. Tons of coal smoke poured from its lofty smokestacks as thousands of employees manufactured armaments and performed

weapons research. Not long after Gert's birth, an explosion at the arsenal sent rockets flying up to two miles away.

Woolwich residents ignored such dangers. The town's fortunes rose and fell with the Royal Arsenal, which provided the necessary income—whether at the arsenal or in related industries—for the seventy-five thousand people living in the area.

And yet the arsenal's industrial smoke mingled with the deep fog each fall and winter. When this smog enveloped the town in 1896, Gert's lungs clamped down again. Feeling as if iron boots weighted her chest, she returned to bed. Fever took hold, her airways narrowed, and Emily ran for the kettle.

Gert spent her time reading—Robert Louis Stevenson's stories were favorites—and trying to keep up with her studies. She recovered in the 1897 spring, but her bronchitis roared back again in the fall.

Concerns for Gert's health intensified in October 1897 when Henry's father died from asthenia—exhaustion compounded by respiratory issues.⁴ Emily and Henry watched their daughter carefully. She might outgrow the bronchitis, but it often led to pneumonia. With Gert's weakened lungs, tuberculosis could set in—always a concern in the nineteenth century. In 1900, 407 people died of either bronchitis or tuberculosis in Woolwich.

Despite her efforts, Gert fell too far behind in school. Her parents removed her for good in early 1898. She was fourteen.

Girls of Gert's social class generally finished school at sixteen, often to prepare for marriage. Gert, however, preferred to follow Dais's example. The close-knit sisters wanted to marry someday, but for the immediate future they aimed for success in the working world.

Dais took to heart her mother's fears of financial ruin and pondered her father's faltering health and long working hours. When she neared graduation, Dais applied herself to the skills necessary for office work—the most acceptable alternative to teaching for women on the cusp of the twentieth century.

At five feet, five inches, a tall woman for the time, Dais stood ramrod straight with narrow, sloping shoulders and a tightly corseted waist. With straight dark brows above blue eyes, she wore her curly brown hair knotted on top of her head. Precise and efficient, loving and generous, Dais doted on her mother and encouraged her sister's dreams.⁵

With the same height and bright blue eyes as Dais, Gert had a rounder face and dark hair that often escaped its hairpins into tendrils. She never showed her teeth in photos and her trim figure resembled her sister's, though she was not as tightly corseted.⁶

As the miserable 1897–98 winter slipped into spring and Gert's breathing eased, her restless mind, denied school, sought another outlet. Gert wanted to help the family, a desire made imperative by her fifty-year-old father's failing health. Her family history—particularly on the maternal side—underscored the reason for concern.



Raised by Woolwich master baker Samuel Hobbs and his wife, Mary Whiteman Hobbs, Henry was the oldest of three sons. The whole family worked in the bakery (Mary behind the counter), but Henry did not want to be a baker.

Emily Amelia Gardner, meanwhile, grew up in Gravesend, the youngest of six children of master baker George Gardner and his wife, Ann Whiteman Gardner. Ann Gardner was Mary Hobbs's sister, making Henry and Emily first cousins.

The Gardner household once employed servants but, by Emily's birth, an embezzling business partner had destroyed the family's standard of living. George Gardner's 1866 death scattered his family into poverty and forced Emily to move in with a widowed cousin's family in London. At age sixteen, she became little more than a servant.⁷

By the 1871 census, twenty-one-year-old Henry worked as a clerk in a Greenwich church. It's not clear when Henry and Emily first fell in love, but their parents did not approve of their proposed

marriage, possibly because they were cousins. Kathleen Chambers later surmised the families disliked the disparity in their social situations, which, combined with Emily's longing for financial security, may have been the catalyst for Henry's ambition and hard work.

By the time of his 1875 elopement with Emily, Henry worked as an auctioneer. Shortly thereafter, he took a position as a commercial clerk—a midlevel accountant—to provide Emily with the lifestyle she craved.⁸ As Henry advanced in the Woolwich gas works, they moved from rented rooms to a leased townhouse on Bowater Crescent, cementing their advancement into the middle class of Queen Victoria's day. Emily settled into her happy life.

But Henry Hobbs died suddenly on June 18, 1898, three weeks before Gert's fifteenth birthday. His death certificate listed the cause as "cerebral atrophy and exhaustion," the equivalent of a stroke in modern medicine.

Her husband's death devastated Emily Hobbs. She lost her emotional, financial, and personal support in one cruel blow, far too reminiscent of her father's catastrophic death.

Henry had rescued her from "poor relation" status with their marriage, and Emily cherished their life. While he left a comfortable estate, the 2015 equivalent of \$220,000, the inheritance would require careful management to sustain the family—particularly Emily—for the rest of her life. And Emily did not have the training for such a task.⁹

Dais stepped into the financial gap and went to work as a clerk in a money-order office of the British postal service. Bert found a clerking position at the Woolwich gas works. The family released their servant and took in a boarder. The women shared cooking, cleaning, and laundry chores.

Gert finally outgrew her bronchitis, though she sustained permanent hearing loss in her left ear. Determined to contribute to the family finances as well, she signed up for a Pittman Shorthand correspondence course. Times were changing. The Royal Arsenal

had hired its first four female typists in 1895 (out of some fourteen thousand workers), and accomplished female stenographers could find employment in the business community.¹⁰

Gert quickly mastered the basic components of shorthand: hooked dashes and curved marks differentiated by their width and placement on a line. Similar to learning a foreign language, the more she practiced, the less she needed to “interpret” the sounds into symbols on the page. Her fingers soon automatically responded and penciled shorthand into a notebook.

Dais and Emily helped her practice. Using a yellow Dixon pencil, Gert placed the sharpened lead on the left-hand side of the paper and, listening carefully, wrote in a fluid motion whatever Dais or Emily read aloud. Once Gert “took down” the passage, she read it back to check for accuracy. Her ability to decipher her notes without error demonstrated her mastery of the skill. Gert always strived for perfection in everything she did; she sensed a path to future success with stenography.

An 1895 article in the *Manchester City News* noted salaries would double if a woman possessed two skills, as “the rates of pay testify to the desirability of making typewriting and shorthand go hand in hand . . . it is essential that girls who desire to become typists should be well up in English composition—spelling and correct punctuation being indispensable. They must be business-like, neat, attentive, accurate, and loyal to their employers.”¹¹

And so, as soon as she mastered shorthand, Gert turned her nimble, piano-playing fingers to a boxy black typewriter and learned how to touch type. Her goal? She wanted to be the first female secretary to the prime minister of England.

Once confident in her abilities, Gert applied for a job at the Woolwich Royal Arsenal. Hired as a typist, the diligent Gert got along well with her employer and colleagues, especially another typist her age named Marian Leman.



With her children gainfully employed, Emily managed the household and dealt with her grief. Their boarder, Reverend Charles Hutchinson, may have encouraged her faith and membership in a local Baptist church.

Emily spent her free time reading and studying the Bible, praying, and having friends in for tea. Her faith grew even as the family's financial circumstances changed. At some point after 1901, Reverend Hutchinson left Woolwich, Bert moved out, and the women had to seek a smaller home.

They relocated to #38 Shooter's Hill Gardens on Westmount Road, a few miles south in Eltham. Built of brick on the flanks of Shooter's Hill (the highest elevation in Kent, with views to London), the new two-story row house boasted a small garden facing the wide street. They could walk to the shops on nearby High Street and to local parks.¹²

Dressed in fashionable white shirtwaists and dark skirts with straw hats perched on their heads, Dais and Gert would catch public transportation to their Woolwich jobs each morning. Despite being in their early twenties, neither woman had marriage prospects on the horizon.

Emily Hobbs transferred her Woolwich church membership to the newly formed Eltham Park Baptist Church down the street. Her daughters joined her, and the three women participated in the ministries and services held at the simple hall.¹³

Eltham Park Baptist Church's first pastor preached his first sermon on Easter Sunday, 1904. The Reverend Arthur C. Chambers had come to the fledgling congregation from a nearby Baptist church. Under his pastoral leadership, membership quickly grew to 140 worshipping in the service and 150 attending Sunday school.

Emily's warmth and hospitable nature overflowed to church members. Sunday afternoon tea provided opportunities for further fellowship and their cozy home soon filled with new friends.

Gert's spiritual life remained private; she never spoke of giving her heart to Christ or professed any sort of testimony. Yet,

throughout her life, anything that caught her interest received full exploration. She studied the Bible and memorized the psalms. After her many disappointments, the loss of her father and the dissolution of their home, the psalms brought comfort.

Dais remained equally silent about her faith. The two sisters applied for church membership at Eltham Park Baptist Church within the year. They were baptized together by immersion at the October 29, 1905, evening service. Gert was twenty-two, Dais twenty-six.¹⁴ Their overjoyed mother wrote her “darling girls” a letter commemorating the event:

My heart is too full for me to say all I should like to you both, it is full of joy at the step you are taking today, a step that will brighten and influence all your life. May that dear Savior. . . . Be very near to you and may you realize the strength of the promises. . . . It makes me so happy to see you both working for the Master.

In the letter, Emily also referenced her disappointment that Bert showed no interest in God. She urged her daughters to pray for him. Her final words were those of a doting mother:

God bless you darlings for all your loving thoughtful care for me, bless you in all your undertakings, ever guide, guard, comfort and strengthen you, and give you much joy in His service. So prays your very loving Mother.¹⁵

Emily couldn’t have suspected her prescience the day she penned her letter. Gert’s first step into service to God became a lifelong walk in obedience and sacrifice.

Shortly after the happy baptism, Reverend Arthur Chambers’s youngest brother came to Eltham to lead a weeklong mission during the Christmas holidays. With a budding reputation as a galvanizing and learned lecturer for the interdenominational League of Prayer, Oswald Chambers spoke nightly on how to be yielded to the Holy Spirit.

The six-foot-tall man who addressed the congregation that December was in his early thirties. Angular and lanky with deep-set blue eyes and brown hair swept from a receding hairline, Oswald Chambers relished opportunities to talk about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and God himself.

Genial, with a playful sense of humor, and gifted with words, he talked quickly and with an intensity that captured his listeners' attention. Oswald lectured extemporaneously, without notes. His only goal: "To have honorable mention in somebody's life in introducing them to God."¹⁶

All three well-read Hobbs women appreciated the depth of his teaching. For Gert, his sermons provided opportunities to practice her stenography skills; she listened and learned better when her hands were engaged.

Emily naturally invited the visiting preacher to the house for tea, no doubt thinking such a godly man must be in want of a good wife.

And with such invitations to tea continuing from Emily, Oswald Chambers visited the family whenever he filled in for Arthur. An articulate guest full of stories and a lover of literature and God, not to mention music, hymns, and dogs, Oswald felt at ease in the Hobbs home.

He was not, however, seeking a wife.



The seventh of eight children born to devout parents in 1874, Oswald spent his early childhood in Scotland and northern England. The family moved to London in 1890. As a teenager, he accompanied his father, Reverend Clarence Chambers, to hear Reverend Charles Spurgeon preach at London's Metropolitan Tabernacle. Oswald gave his life to God that night.

Notably talented in music and art, Oswald played the organ, trained at London's Royal College of Art, and returned to Scotland in 1895 to study art at the University of Edinburgh. He also

pondered theology and visited local churches to hear the accomplished preachers then occupying Edinburgh's pulpits.

He saw himself as a bridge between intellectuals and God. Oswald anticipated his love for literature, music, and art, along with his devotion to the gospel, would surely touch a chord in the lives of sensitive artists.

Jobs and income, however, did not materialize. Eventually Oswald came to the reluctant conclusion God might be calling him to the ministry. Despite feeling far from God at the time, he enrolled at Dunoon Bible College near Glasgow in 1897, where Reverend Duncan MacGregor, founder of the small college, mentored him.

God finally breached Oswald's dark spiritual period during a 1901 meeting of the local League of Prayer, where he claimed the gift of the Holy Spirit as a result of Luke 11:13: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"

As part of the Holiness Movement then sweeping the British Isles and America, the League of Prayer focused on an individual's personal salvation and how to apply God's moral law to behavior. Oswald appreciated the League's focus on prayer, church revival, and the spread of biblical knowledge—which corresponded to God's emphasis in his own life.

The League, which operated one hundred centers around the British Isles (including thirty in London alone),¹⁷ sponsored more than thirteen thousand services in 1897. It also published a monthly magazine, *Tongues of Fire* (later retitled *Spiritual Life*), for which Oswald occasionally wrote. League of Prayer founder Reader Harris recognized and encouraged Oswald as a promising speaker and teacher. Shortly after meeting the Hobbs family in late 1905, Oswald became a volunteer circuit lecturer with the League.

He received no salary and lodged with League of Prayer members in the towns where he spoke. Offerings and personal gifts covered his train fares. The lack of a salary didn't bother Oswald—he believed

God would provide for all his needs and had ample experience of him doing so.

Oswald soon became friends with Japanese evangelist Juji Nakada. He traveled to America with Nakada in November 1906 to teach a course at God's Bible School, which was affiliated with the Holiness Movement, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Afterward, the two journeyed to Japan, where Oswald examined international evangelism and missionary work. He resumed speaking for the League of Prayer when he returned to England in late 1907. (Upon his return, Oswald pulled a coin from his pocket to show his brother and pointed out he had traveled around the world on a mere shilling!)

As the years went by, Oswald concentrated his thoughts on God rather than on seeking a wife. A teenage romance had brought joy and anguish, leaving him reluctant to invite a woman into his nomadic ministry life. Oswald served God better unencumbered. He didn't have the income to support a wife, much less a home.

Loved by dogs, children, old ladies, and members of the League of Prayer, Oswald was welcomed everywhere by Christians who wanted to advance the kingdom of God. His relationships remained cordial with no suggestion of anything beyond good fellowship.

And so his friendship with the Hobbs women proceeded amiably for two and a half years—until one day, when Emily Hobbs wrote him a letter.