



BELIEVE IN MIRACLES

**A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY
OF POSITIVE CHANGE**

CARMEL THOMASON

**AUTHOR OF
AGAINST THE ODDS**

BELIEVE IN MIRACLES

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OF POSITIVE CHANGE**

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A NEW DAY

Jesus replied, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

MATTHEW 22:37–40

Each morning we are given the miracle of a new day, so why do so many of us wake with feelings of dread or wanting to pull the covers back over our head? We all experience times when our lives don't feel like our own; when so many people and priorities want a piece of us that we don't know where to turn first. For many people, this overwhelming busyness has become the natural order of life. So often we wait until crises hit before we start re-evaluating our lives to make positive changes. It is at times like these, when it seems that there is nowhere left to turn, that we need to strip everything back and trust God to work change in our lives.

What if we didn't wait? What if we took a step back from the hustle and bustle of daily living to think about what we truly want from life? What if we decided to ask for God's help right now?

If you've picked up this book I'm guessing that you've got a heart for God, but sometimes life can get in the way of our best intentions. Jesus called us to love God and to love our neighbour. Two requests—that's it. So what happened to make our lives and our faith so complicated? We want to experience love, wonder, beauty, joy, and creativity, yet

our reality is often something very different. We would like to feel more connected to ourselves, to God and to other people, but often we can't see how this could be possible.

In the next 40 days you will discover small practical steps you can take right now to help you make lasting changes towards a more prayerful, contented and connected life—improving your attitude towards yourself, deepening your relationship with God, and strengthening your relationships with others. You will also learn how to simplify your life to be more aligned with God's unique purpose for you, so that instead of being elusive, the enriching experiences of love, wonder, beauty, joy and creativity become part of your everyday.

I would encourage you to read no more than one day at a time. Some of the exercises involve activities as you go about your day, and it may be helpful to read a day ahead, so that you are ready to start when you wake. You may also find it useful to keep a journal of your thoughts as you go through each week, to help you recognise where God is working in your life and to be more open to his call.

None of us in life escapes suffering and on several occasions I have found myself stripping everything away and asking God, 'Where do I go from here?' It is a vulnerable position, but it can also be a very freeing one. This book has grown out of that prayer. We learn to lean on God by doing just that. Wherever you are in your spiritual journey right now, it's OK. God meets us where we are; all he asks is that we show up for our part. The miracle of the day is already yours; the adventure begins when you're open to experience it fully.

WEEK 1

BE STILL

Be still, and know that I am God.

PSALM 46:10

DAY 1

SILENCE

‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.’

MARK 6:31

When I was a child, if my brother and I were squabbling in the car about what music to listen to, my mum would always chip in asking, ‘When do I get what I want to listen to?’

‘You never want to listen to anything,’ we’d say in unison.

‘That’s right. I just want a bit of peace and quiet for a while. It’s a choice to play nothing as well.’

‘Well, when someone makes a record of silence, mum, you can have that,’ I’d joke, but really I was annoyed. How was nothing a choice? A choice to be silent—at the time I couldn’t think of anything more ridiculous or boring. Now that I am nearer the age my mum was then, I can understand better what she meant.

In today’s 24-hour economy it has become increasingly difficult to find silent spaces, and for many people silence is so unusual that when they do experience it the feeling is uncomfortable rather than calming. From this perspective all silences are awkward ones, simply a void that needs to be filled quickly with something— chatter, music, television, computer games, internet surfing, whatever it may be.

For a long time it has been known that exposure to environmental noise, such as the sound of pneumatic drills,

low-flying aircraft, road noise, loud music at 3 am or someone else's dog barking, adversely affects our health. Scientific studies have shown that being exposed to increased levels of environmental noise is linked to high blood pressure, heart disease, sleep disturbance and poor work performance.¹ The World Health Organisation has made recommendations for governments to introduce policies controlling environmental noise, but while other forms of environmental stress, such as second-hand smoke, dioxins and benzene, are falling, environmental noise is a problem that continues to increase. On an individual level there may be nothing we can do about this growing level of noise in our lives. Yet, what about the type of noise that can't be measured in scientific studies, the noise that we can do something about, the noise that we choose to experience every day? How much time do you spend watching TV, listening to the radio, playing music, surfing the internet or playing games using computers, tablets, or smartphones?

A report from the UK's TV Licensing revealed that we often underestimate just how much time we spend in these pursuits.² The majority of adults surveyed for the report claimed to watch less than 20 hours of TV a week, the equivalent of about three hours a day. However, official figures showed the true average to be more like 30 hours a week, or more than four hours a day. That's a lot of time, and doesn't include the time we spend watching video content on devices other than our TVs.

In highlighting this, I'm not suggesting that we stop watching our favourite TV shows, listening to music or connecting with friends online, but rather that we recognise the time we spend doing these things is a choice. I think these activities sometimes become such a part of our everyday life

that we don't see them as an active choice, and we certainly don't realise the stress our need for constant entertainment might be causing. I know I didn't.

For a long time I was one of those people who filled every waking hour with noise of some sort. I'd wake up to the radio and fall asleep to music. I worked in a thriving city centre where the growth of new developments was fuelling a boom in the construction industry. Mine was an open plan office, a buzzing newsroom that was alive with conversation, ringing phones, and 24-hour news on the TV. It was lively and exciting! There was always something happening, and I never knew from one moment to the next what that might be.

I didn't understand why anyone would choose to spend time in silence. To me, silence was the same as doing nothing, and I always had to be doing something. Looking back, it's not surprising that I sometimes questioned the relevance of faith to my life. How could I hear from God if I never took the time to listen? God was always there; it was just that I was never still long enough to recognise him working in my life, or to hear the Spirit that he's placed in me, as he has in all of us.

All relationships need time devoted to them if they are to deepen, and our relationship with God is no different in that sense. You may have built some quiet time into your day already, but if you haven't, I'd encourage you, for each one of the 40 days of this journey, to spend some time in silence. If you are not used to this, it may feel like a challenge, and one I understand. It was difficult for me to do this at first, and I would often make excuses as to why I didn't have the time. There was always something more important to do. After all, doing something has got to trump doing nothing, hasn't it?

A wake-up call of any sort can be an excellent source of change, and for me it was clear that I was reaching burnout and needed to slow down. There was a church near where I worked at the time, called St Mary's, The Hidden Gem. If you are visiting Manchester, I would encourage you to stop by. The church is tucked away on Mulberry Street, between Deansgate and Albert Square. Inside you will find the 14 Stations of the Cross painted by the late Norman Adams in the early 1990s. Adams considered the paintings to be the greatest works of his life and there is no doubt that they attract a lot of people into the building. However, the peacefulness of the space, to be found just off one of the city's main shopping streets, will no doubt stay in the mind equally as much. The church was originally built in 1794 in an attempt to address the need of those living in poor-quality housing in what was then one of the city's most deprived and troubled areas. Writing in his *History of the Diocese of Manchester* the Reverend Arthur J. Dobb, comments, 'St Mary's much rebuilt, still stands on the same plot of land, now surrounded by the edifices of sophisticated materialism, which is probably more spiritually barren ground than the moral vileness of the 18th century.'³

I'm not sure that the city of Manchester is any more spiritually barren than any other major urban area, but I am pleased that the church is there and that its doors are open during the day to anyone who wants to escape the hustle and bustle of daily life, if just for a moment, to reconnect with their higher purpose and to find some peace.

It was only after I had been visiting the church regularly for several weeks that I began to notice that I missed that quiet time on days when I didn't go. I began to think about this time spent in silence, as the Bible describes it, as spending

time in the presence of God. Indeed, even Jesus needed that, and would go off to quiet places, to be alone and pray (Luke 5:16). Why had I believed that I could be different, that I could feel close to God without spending any quality time with him?

I have been spending quiet time with God each day for more than ten years now, and in that time I have come to view these moments as a privilege rather than a chore. Before I began spending quiet time with God, I hadn't realised just how noisy my own thoughts were. Most mornings when I woke up, my mind would feel like a busy train station because there were so many different thoughts rushing through it. I used to think that was normal, because it was for me. After a couple of months of spending regular quiet time with God, I began to wake up feeling more refreshed and calmer. My runaway brain, which I'd thought was so much a part of myself, didn't need to be that way. It was a gradual change and one that I only really noticed when a stressful situation would arise and I'd realise that I wasn't reacting as strongly as I might once have done. Things that at one time would have upset me, I began to brush aside or bounce back from much more easily.

To give you a simple example, I was recently travelling on a train that was delayed. The journey should have taken almost three hours, so an extra 40 minutes meant that I was beginning to feel tired and hungry, and there was no restaurant car on board. Once off the train I was told that the tram service to my home was not running and I had to wait 20 minutes for a replacement bus. Unfortunately, the bus didn't drive me the whole way home; instead it stopped for me to pick up a tram which was running several stops down the road. Another problem was that the bus couldn't

pull up alongside this tram stop. So, I had to cross a busy dual carriageway in the dark and walk for three minutes, pulling a heavy case behind me, to get to the tram stop, which was raised on a high platform, and the escalator wasn't working so I had to haul my luggage up two flights of steps, where I waited in the cold for another ten minutes until a tram arrived to take me home. What should have been a 15 minute journey from the station ended up taking me more than an hour.

The reason I'm telling you this in wearisome detail is to explain that it wasn't that I didn't notice all the delays or inconveniences of my journey. I did notice them, but I also realised that they didn't bother me in a way that they might have done years ago. At one time I would have been irritated by each minor mishap, and I would probably have moaned to anyone who would listen about the unreliability of public transport. This time that familiar churning of anxiety wasn't there; instead, I opened my front door feeling pleased to be home and was able to enjoy the rest of my evening.

Of course, I still sometimes get caught up in the busyness of life, as we all can, and rush ahead with my day without taking some time out simply to be. However, I notice that when I take the time to make silence with God a regular part of my day, small daily irritations don't seem to have such an impact on me. The feeling of inner calm that comes from taking time to nourish my spirit is not simply a feeling; it is a strength which allows me to view my life with greater perspective; to listen to the still small voice inside me; to notice where God is working in my life; to save my energy for where my actions can make a positive difference, and, as my family has noticed, to be a better person to be around.

There are many ways you can build quiet time into your

day, and how you do it is up to you. I find it best to get up 15 minutes earlier and make space first thing in the morning. That way I know that there is no chance that the time I've set aside for silence will be squeezed out by other activities of the day.

Before you begin, find a place where you won't be disturbed. If this is difficult, explain to your family what you are doing so that they can support you. If all else fails, find somewhere quiet outside your home—drive to work 15 minutes early and park up in your car, find a nearby church, or lock yourself in the bathroom if it's the only place you know you'll not be disturbed.

Find a comfortable position, preferably sitting upright; close your eyes, and take a couple of good deep breaths to help relax your body, before allowing your breath to return to normal. Imagine you are breathing in God's love and breathing out anything that is troubling you.

If you are new to any form of meditation or contemplative prayer, you may find that quietening the mind is not always as simple as relaxing the body. Don't worry, you are far from alone in this! According to scientists at the University of California and Los Angeles Laboratory of Neuro Imaging, the average person has 70,000 thoughts a day. That's the equivalent of almost 50 thoughts a minute or one every second. In sitting quietly, it's important to recognise that we are not attempting to empty our mind of thoughts, but we can quieten them down, so that instead of being caught up in mental patterns that tie us to the past or propel us to the future, we experience life more presently and in doing so experience God at the heart of our being.

Repetitive phrases or mantras can help to quieten the mind. You may want to use a verse of scripture, or a simple

phrase such as, 'I am filled with the healing love of God'. The World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) based on the teaching of Benedictine monk, John Main, suggests using the Aramaic word, *maranatha*, which means, 'Come, Lord Jesus.' It is the word that Paul uses to end his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:22) and John uses it at the close of the book of Revelation (Revelation 22:20). You can use the English translation if you like, although many people find the Aramaic form helpful because for most people it doesn't have any images associated with it. Experiment with a few words or phrases until you find a form of words that works for you.

Repeat your chosen phrase slowly in your mind. Don't worry if your thoughts wander to something else—this is normal. When you notice this happening, don't follow your thought. By that, I mean that if you think about what you are going to cook for dinner, don't start considering options or preparing a meal in your mind; simply bring your thoughts back to your chosen phrase. Do this each time your thoughts wander, and you will find that in time your mind settles down. If you find that you can't relax because you are concerned about the time, particularly if you are finding space for God before leaving for work, you can set a timer. There are many timers and stopwatches available, but I like to use the WCCM timer that can be downloaded for free as part of the WCCM app.

If you are not used to taking time out to be with God in silence, it may feel at first as if nothing is happening and you may have the urge to get up and do other things. Don't worry about this. In time you will find that this silent space and closeness to God that you are cultivating will start to stay with you as a deeper sense of calm as you go through

the rest of your day. You may not even notice it yourself until someone else points it out to you. As my brother said to me, ‘What’s happened to you? When did you get so patient?’ How do I begin to answer that? I didn’t need to do anything. I simply opened my heart to God, and he did the rest.

TODAY’S PRACTICE

- 1** Find 15 minutes in your day to sit quietly, close your eyes, take in a couple of deep breaths to help you relax, and be still in the presence of God. Imagine you are breathing in God’s love and breathing out anything that is troubling you.
- 2** Chose a word or phrase that is comforting for you and repeat it gently in your mind. Examples you might want to try are: ‘*maranatha*’; ‘I am filled with the healing love of God’; ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’. If your thoughts wander, don’t worry about this; it is normal. When this happens, simply notice it and bring your thoughts back to your chosen word or phrase.
- 3** We are going to be doing this practice every day for the next 40 days, so in that time you can experiment to see what is the best way within your lifestyle to fit in some silent time each day. There is no right or wrong way to make time to listen to God; the important thing is to find a way that works for you.

DAY 2

REMEMBER THE GOOD

If anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

Do you ever have one of those days when nothing seems to go right? First the alarm fails to go off and, realising you've slept in, you stub your toe while getting out of bed too quickly. Brushing your teeth in haste, you end up splashing toothpaste on your shirt, and you have to leave the house with a wet patch where you'd tried to wash it off because you didn't have time to iron anything else to wear. When you finally get on your way after ten minutes, you find your car sitting bumper-to-bumper on the road, random horns keep beeping, and, although the traffic lights seem to be changing, nothing is moving because other people, who are probably also rushing like you, have thought it a good idea to enter the box junction and block the traffic from moving in any direction. Oh, did I forget to mention, it's raining and you've forgotten your umbrella, so the walk from the car park to the office isn't going to be much fun. Unfortunately, it doesn't get any better once you get to work, because there are lots of changes going on and most people feel over-worked, disgruntled and insecure. At lunchtime your daughter rings you. She's in tears about something that's happened at school and, as much as you try to, you don't understand what she's talking about; then you get home to find the cat has vomited

on the duvet, and your friend has left a message on voicemail cancelling the one evening you were looking forward to all week.

On days like these it's tempting to think that life stinks. OK, nothing that people might consider 'really bad' has happened, but you're just worn down under the weight of a thousand little miseries and it feels as if there's no enjoyment in life any more. We've all had such days, perhaps not with the same experiences, but filled with minor calamities and irritations. When we feel like this it's easy for the bad to overcrowd the good, sometimes to the extent that we think everything is wrong and nothing is right.

There have been occasions in my life when 'wrong side of the bed' days became my norm. These have nearly always been during times of prolonged stress. Perhaps, like me at those times, you have good reason to feel as if life has handed you a raw deal. Perhaps you've lost a loved one; your relationship has broken down; your job has been made redundant; or you've got a bad prognosis for your health. We can't ignore these things and pretend that they are not happening, but if we are truly to believe what Paul said in his letter to the Romans, that all things work together for good (Romans 8:28), we need to stay open to recognising the good when God places it on our path.

Easier said than done, you might say. I know. I might not have experienced exactly the same circumstances as the ones you are facing right now, but I have been through times when I could find no rest in sleep and yet when morning came I found it a struggle to lift my head from the pillow because I couldn't face what the day might bring.

At times like these I've taken comfort in the words Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians in which he

explains that the temptations and trials we face in life are experienced by many other people (1 Corinthians 10:13). Reading this passage reminds me that, however I might be feeling in the moment, I am not alone. God never promises that life will be easy, but when we are struggling he promises to be alongside us, offering a loving refuge in which we can rest and gain strength (Psalm 46:1).

It was at one such time, several years ago now, that I began keeping a note of good things that happened to me during the day. To try to do as Paul preached, and to fill my mind with things that are good and deserve praise: things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable (Philippians 4:8). I bought a 'week to view' diary just for this purpose, and each evening before I went to bed I wrote down everything good that had happened in the day. The rules were that I had to make sure I filled the space for that day's diary entry; I could write only good things, and whatever I wrote had to have happened that day. If Paul could speak with such confidence and joy while imprisoned by the Romans, then the least I could do was to recognise some of his wisdom and try to apply it to my own life.

At first, I found it difficult to think of anything good that was happening because my mind was so preoccupied with my troubles. That was precisely why I had decided to keep a list of good things God was doing for me, because I knew that there must be some good in my life somewhere—I just couldn't see it. It wasn't that I wanted to deny the difficult stuff happening. I was all too aware of that side of my life, but I needed another perspective, something to help me deal with my problems, or to let them pass, or whatever I needed to do to feel that life was worth living again. What I didn't need to do, and what I was in danger of doing, was to turn

whatever was happening now into the story of the rest of my life.

We've all done it—turned our current situation into a negative vision for our future, thinking, I'll never get well, I'll never find a job, I'll never get out of debt, I'll never kick this addiction, I'll never find the right relationship, I'll never make friends, I'll never be able to afford my own home, I'll never lose weight... the list goes on. We take our situation as it is now and we can't see how life can ever improve. I'd done that so many times and I was trying not to do it again.

The previous year while I was travelling in Europe I met a young woman who had been divorced for a couple of years. She talked at great length about her ex-husband, going over and over what had happened during their marriage, to try to understand where things had started to go wrong. As much as she talked, she never did come up with any answers, none that she could be certain of anyway. She even began to question if her whole marriage had been a lie—if her ex-husband had ever loved her at all. I understood that she needed to talk, but I also noticed how she moved from talking about her ex-husband to making sweeping statements about the rest of her life. 'I'll never find anyone to love me,' she said and I could tell from her tone and expression that when she spoke those words, she truly believed them.

Looking from the outside, that vision of her future seemed so unlikely. Until she had opened her heart to me that wasn't how I saw her at all. I saw her as an attractive, well dressed, independent woman who was friendly and outgoing. Why would I have struck up a conversation with her if she was such an unlovable person, as she perceived herself to be? From listening to her talk, you'd think that there was nothing good in her life, but I only had to look at her and

our surroundings to see that wasn't true. If I'm truly honest, I also sympathised because I recognised myself in some of the things she said. I'd thought similar things about myself in the past and had believed them too. When we hear our own words come back to us from someone else, we can realise just how self-pitying we must sound, and self-pity is never an attractive emotion. There were plenty of good things to thank God for in her life, even if it was simply the sunshine, the fresh food and the sea view we enjoyed that afternoon.

Sometimes it can be hard to notice the good things that are right in front of us for all to see. When I first started writing down good things that had happened each day, I struggled to fill that small space with anything. I started giving myself little treats so that I would have something good to write down. I did things like putting fresh sheets on my bed so that I could write: I have clean sheets and my bed feels cosy and warm. I'd buy a glass of fresh orange juice at lunchtime and savour the taste of it, or go for a walk after work and watch the sunset.

Once I started looking for items to write down, I began noticing a lot more good things happening. Someone would hold a door open for me while I was out shopping, a driver would wave me through the traffic, or a friend would give me a compliment. Each time something nice happened in my day I'd think, great, I need to remember that, it's something to add to my list. I think a lot of these small kindnesses were probably happening all the time, but I had stopped noticing them.

After a while I didn't need to try to fill the space with good things, because on most days I could have filled the space many times over. I could see the good in life again because I was looking for it, and it was only a couple of months before

my circumstances began to improve in ways that I could never have imagined.

Since then, I haven't always kept my 'good news diary' every day, but I've found that when I do, it helps me to keep a better perspective on life. Like everyone I still go through trying times, and I've found that those are the times when I get the most benefit from this daily practice. These days I use a small notebook and use a page for each day, and on any days when, for whatever reason, I don't write in the book, I always make a mental list in my head on going to bed and give thanks to God for everything on it.

Sometimes I re-read what I've written months later and it helps me to see my life in greater perspective. I know when I was going through a particularly difficult time, but I also see pages of small kindnesses and blessings, which I could have so easily overlooked. They shine through like rays of hope, a reminder that however dark our circumstances are, the darkness is never the whole story.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

- 1** Find 15 minutes in your day to sit quietly, close your eyes, take in a couple of deep breaths to help you relax, and be still in the presence of God. Imagine you are breathing in God's love and breathing out anything that is troubling you.
- 2** Get yourself a pocket notebook or a 'week to view' pocket diary that you will use only for the purpose of this exercise.
- 3** At the end of the day, spend five minutes thinking about any good things that have happened and things that you have enjoyed. The task is to fill the space for the day's diary entry. Don't stop writing until the space is full. It doesn't matter how

big or small the thing is that you choose to write down. All that matters is that you are noting something to thank God for and that it happened today. If you have to give yourself a treat so that you have something good to write down, then do it.

BELIEVE IN MIRACLES

is a 40-day journey that will open your eyes to the extraordinary to be found in the everyday. Focusing on small practical steps, you are invited to follow a series of short exercises that will help bring about lasting changes in your life, leading to a more prayerful, contented and connected state of being. By setting aside as little as 20 minutes a day, you will learn to view differently your daily circumstances, your relationship with God, and your relationships with others, bringing something of the ways of heaven to earth.

As Carmel Thomason writes in her introduction:

'We all want to experience love, wonder, beauty, joy, and creativity, yet our reality is often something very different. We would like to feel more connected to ourselves, to God and to other people, but often we can't see how this could be possible. Wherever you are in your spiritual journey right now, it's OK. God meets us where we are; all he asks is that we show up for our part. The miracle of the day is already yours; the adventure begins when you're open to experience it fully.'



Carmel Thomason is an author, journalist and speaker whose writing explores how we can live out the gospel by focusing on the extraordinary to be found in the everyday. She has also written *Against the Odds* and *Every Moment Counts* and has collaborated with the Archbishop of York on *Faith Stories* and *Hope Stories*.

'With a skilled journalist's ear for compelling human stories and an engaging faith grounded in scripture and the goodness of God, Carmel Thomason proves in these pages a reliable spiritual guide in perplexing times. She brings intelligence, kindness and wit to her chosen themes and without preaching or condescension persuades us that life can be different and better.' **Canon Dr Rod Garner, Anglican priest, writer and theologian**



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