

## keeping the faith

**Jennifer Graham Kizer** explains what holds her marriage together: love, romance, communication, and, above all, her abiding faith in God.

**When I was single, I prayed for a spouse.** My husband, Lee, was God's spot-on, bang-up answer. He's sexy; he likes the Mets; he wears jeans to church. Of all the men on earth, he'd be my desert-island pick.

Eight months after we met, we stood before our divine matchmaker and exchanged holy pledges of commitment. We vowed to keep it going forever, and God sealed our union with his spirit.

None of that seems especially relevant now, two years later, while we're glaring at each other across a crowded aisle at Babies"R"Us. We've just had a communication misfire. I said, "We need to baby-proof the den better." He heard, "You're failing at protecting your family."

Of course, he's being crazy. Right? Isn't that crazy? Well, not to him. What I think is reminding or suggesting, Lee perceives as nagging.

But our spiritual seal—the one we made when we took our vows—is standing sentry around us even here, in the child-safety aisle. Lee and I are bound together by more than our promises to each other. We've promised *God* that we'll make this marriage work. And through Scripture, God has assured us that he'll empower us to do it.

In a situation like this one at Babies"R"Us, the last thing I want to do is concede. Why should I? I'm the one in the right! I'm right! I'm right! I'm right! But faith offers me a more palatable option: Let God handle it. It's not giving in. It's more



## REAL-LIFE LOVE

like getting out of the driver's seat and moving to the back so that a NASCAR champion can take the wheel.

So I drop the subject. Later, at home, I'll pray about it in a way that God's suggested: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." And what tends to happen, usually that very day, is this: The situation gets defused. The den gets baby-proofed.

I don't necessarily attribute this result to God's unfathomable, supernatural power—at least not every time. Just the act of taking time out to pray has a way of resolving conflicts. I'm able to back down without feeling defeated. Lee responds by softening. The argument fails to escalate. The sun appears, and birds come out to sing.

On my smarter days, I manage to avoid our skirmishes altogether—by running my thoughts by God first, *then* my husband. I usually start with thinking, This is what I want! But eventually,

**"On my smarter days, I manage to avoid skirmishes with my husband—by running my thoughts by God first, *then* Lee."**

thoughts of how Lee might see things and how God sees them drift into my head. When I consider other points of view, I'm less quick to judge and I can catch myself if I'm being passive-aggressive or harboring unrelated resentments. After spending time with God, I can focus more on the outcome of the discussion I want to have with Lee, rather than on my anger or hurt feelings, so my sentiments tend to come out the way I truly mean them.

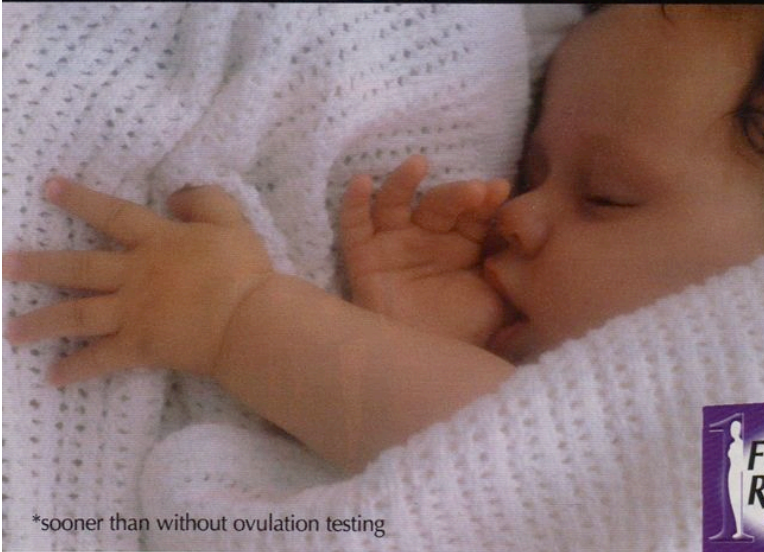
Honestly, there's so much unfairness in marriage, I don't understand how other couples make it work *without* faith. For example: How am I, the astute Ms. Pennywise, supposed to live with Mr. Crazy Impulse Buy? (Lee would probably come up with a different nickname here.) Why do I get to

drive the Passat and he's stuck with the '95 Ford? With the ever-shifting give-and-take, how do we stay in love?

First of all, we take our cues from the Bible. God's advice on marriage, more or less, is to serve each other. A couple of times a week, Lee asks, "How can I serve you?" Sometimes he's more wry than earnest—I can practically hear him thinking, Just don't ask me for another neck rub. But as I write these words, Lee is taking our 1-year-old off my hands. I'm drinking an iced latte that he drove to Dunkin' Donuts to buy for me. Isn't that sweet? Don't you want to give him a big kiss? I do.

Second, we try to accept God's promise to help, especially on difficult tasks like forgiveness. When Jesus commanded his followers to forgive, they

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answered, "Increase our faith!" I usually feel the same way, especially after Lee lobs some cranky criticism my way. Often, when he apologizes, I'm still in the "how dare he!" zone. It's not easy to move into "apology accepted" territory. I have to trust that Lee won't take advantage of my kindness—and that takes some big love. But according to Scripture, you can ask God to "make your love increase and overflow for each other." So I ask. Thinking about all the things God's forgiven *me* for usually puts me in the right frame of mind to accept Lee's apology.

But faith doesn't just help Lee and me get along—it gives us a deeper purpose. "Marriage is more than your love for each other," wrote the Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. "It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God's holy ordinance." By God's definition, our union is a training ground for spreading his love to others.

By forgiving each other's slights and overlooking the other's faults, we're

learning how to love. Not big-screen, romantic-comedy love, but *true* love. The way that God loves us.

This prepares us for loving *other* people, warts and all. Every night before dinner, we pick a person to pray for as a couple. Often it's a member of his family or mine. But we've also prayed for his boss, and for people we've read about in the paper. These people benefit from our prayers—we are sure of it. But so do we, because prayer brings an ethereal dimension to our marriage. We want God to use

**"By overlooking each other's faults, Lee and I are learning how to love. Not big-screen, romantic-comedy love, but *true* love."**

our partnership in his work—whether that means alleviating suffering or just letting others know he's there.

For reasons along these lines, I fell for Lee all over again last fall. We were volunteering at a camp for underprivileged kids, and most of the adults were milling around the swings, offering pushes. But what the kids really wanted to do was play on the towering and perilous rope jungle gym. None of the adults, me included, would go near it.

None but Lee, that is. He scrambled to the top of this giant death net and helped a half dozen grateful boys climb up it, too. They beamed and laughed and shouted to Lee—the cool counselor who went beyond the call of duty for them. This generosity really impressed me. I wrapped my arms around him. And you can guess what I said.

"How can I serve you?"

In that moment, serving Lee was my heart's desire. People define love in many ways, but I think this is what God has in mind. 