

Flourishing Together

THE TINY CHURCH HAD ONLY 18 members, but it was full of family conflicts, interpersonal challenges, and destructive criticism. It was so hard to change their negative culture. We were fresh out of college, and they had an inherent distrust of pastors.

We had a choice: we could shrivel up in this emotional and spiritual desert, or we could strengthen our dependency on God, learn how to support each other, and find a way to flourish in spite of our circumstances. It wasn't easy. We were perilously close to burning out and giving up. But we learned how important it is to help protect each other, and our marriage, from the wear and tear of ministry.

PRAY FOR EACH OTHER—Heb. 4:16

Just hearing our partners pray for us can soothe away the stress. When we pray for our partners, we're handing them a magnifying glass that helps them see God's love more clearly. Kate and Liam have different schedules, so they keep two small notebooks on their kitchen table. One is filled with Kate's prayer concerns and one with Liam's. Each day they pick up their partner's book, pray for the person's concerns, and sometimes write a short prayer in the notebook or on a slip of paper to carry and read throughout the day.

Tina and Joe send each other short SMS prayers throughout the day. Whenever Joe



“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: if either of them falls down, one can help the other up. . . . Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken”

Ecc. 4:9, 10, 12, NIV

has a challenge he sends Tina a message. He knows she'll be praying for him during a difficult meeting or a sensitive visit. And he does the same for her. These brief, comforting prayers help them to feel closer to God and to each other.

BE INSPIRED TOGETHER

Make a list of Bible verses that strengthen and comfort you. You might focus on Psalm 103, Psalm 145, or 1 John 4:7-21. And Philippians 4 will help re-balance your emotions when you feel drained. Paul has packed this short passage with practical suggestions for flourishing in the desert, such as focusing on the good things in your life, finding gratitude in every situation, praying about your concerns, and supporting each other through your struggles.

ENJOY MOMENTS OF WONDER—Ps. 104

Taking a short walk together up the hill behind our home is one of our lifelines. Along the path we chat, share ideas and prayer concerns, burn off some energy, and immerse ourselves in God's creation. We watch wildlife, pick berries, and notice the trees changing with the seasons. On the summit we catch our breath and admire the hills and valleys in every direction. Someone has inscribed Psalm 121:1 on a rock. We watch the sunset swirls of rose and gold. Twilight mist hovers over the river valleys, and the moon rises with the stars. We're filled with wonder as we wander back home feeling refreshed, happy, and calm.

Admiring God's creation always lifts our hearts and brings us closer together. If you don't have an inspiring place to walk, find some shells, flowers, feathers, or even your own hands. Choose an object, focus on it quietly until you think of at least five things that fill you with wonder, and then spend a few moments sharing your discoveries with each other.

CHOOSE GRATITUDE—1 Thess. 5:18

Even in the desert there are diamonds. They're harder to find, but they're still there. Focusing on God's gifts, even in tough times, can help us to feel more hopeful. Make a list of 30 things

you're thankful for; 30 reasons you're thankful for your spouse; 30 reasons you're glad you're a ministry couple, or 30 good things about pastoring and fellowshiping with your local church.

Create a poster reminding you of your blessings and place it on your bathroom mirror or fridge. Share your gratitude for the smallest blessings. Focus on what went well each day, and thank God for helping you through the challenges.



LAUGH TOGETHER—Prov. 15:13

Laughter fills you with positive hormones that help counteract the stress in your body, especially when you're laughing together. Try making your partner laugh at least once a day. Find crazy cards to send, look at funny photos of animals, watch a Christian comedian for a few minutes, or plan surprises for each other. Search the Internet for clean jokes and humor, play games, and do the things you used to do for fun.

DO SOMETHING WELL TOGETHER—Col. 3:23

Find a ministry or hobby that you both enjoy. During our desert experience we started running marriage retreats. Some of our ministry friends joined a tennis club to help them have fun together, stay healthy, and make friends in their community. You could plant a garden, restore furniture, make music, or go on a mission trip.

KEEP CALM—John 14:27

Take care of each other by lowering your partner's stress and anxiety. In this issue you'll find an article about de-stressing for couples; try the ideas that appeal to you. Try to notice and do more of what soothes your partner. If you accidentally add to your partner's stress, try saying, "I'm so sorry. I realize what I just said or did wasn't very helpful. What can I say or do right now to soothe some of your stress or take something off your load?"

HOLD ON TO HOPE—Jer. 29:11

When you're walking through the desert, the whole world can feel dark, and it's hard to be optimistic. Share your hopes for the next day, week, month, year, and even farther ahead. How can you nurture your spouse's hopes—or make those hopes a reality? How can you encourage your spouse when they are feeling overwhelmed? What are God's hopes for each of you, and how can those hopes comfort you and guide you through the desert?

LOVE GOD, OTHERS, AND YOURSELVES—1 Cor. 13:4

"And the greatest of these is love." When we focus on God's love for us and let His love flow through our lives into each other, we can flourish in the driest deserts. Be kind and gentle, lifting each other's burdens rather than adding to them. Ask your husband or wife what you do that helps them to feel especially loved, and just do it. You'll both be blessed.

And finally, "Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder" (Rom. 12:11, 12, *The Message*). J

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