

# **The Cozy Seasons: Summer at Home**

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# The Cozy Seasons: Summer at Home

*Devotions, Stories, Activities, and Recipes for Simple Family Moments*

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## Chapter 1 — A Season of Light

### **Scripture (NLT):**

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." — Matthew 11:28*

### **Devotional Reflection**

Summer carries its own kind of rhythm, one that feels lighter and freer than other times of the year. The sun rises early, streaming through curtains to gently wake us, and lingers late into the evening. Cicadas hum their chorus, and fireflies flicker like lanterns at dusk. There is a sweetness to these long days, a sense that time stretches just a little wider, inviting us to breathe more deeply and slow down.

Yet even in summer's beauty, it is easy to fill every moment with busyness—sports schedules, vacations, house projects, yard work, endless activities meant to "make the most of the season." But if we aren't careful, the gift of summer can slip through our hands, leaving us more weary than refreshed.

Jesus knew this about us. He knew how prone we are to run ourselves ragged, carrying the weight of responsibilities and expectations, even in seasons meant for rest. That's why His invitation in Matthew 11:28 is as timely in July as it is in January: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*

Notice that Jesus doesn't say, *"I'll give you more energy so you can do more things."* He doesn't offer us a quick boost so we can keep pushing forward. No—He offers rest. Soul-deep, peace-filled rest that has nothing to do with our to-do list and everything to do with being close to Him.

Think about what summer rest could look like when it's anchored in Christ. Maybe it's choosing to linger over a glass of lemonade on the porch instead of rushing back inside to fold the laundry. Maybe it's listening to the laughter of children playing in the yard and letting that joy remind you of your own childlike trust in God. Maybe it's reading your Bible outdoors while the sun warms your shoulders, soaking in both the light of the world and the light of His Word.

We live in a culture that glorifies busyness, even in our leisure. "Make the most of your summer," the advertisements say, filling our heads with images of exotic vacations, perfect barbecues, and jam-packed schedules. But Jesus whispers something different. He says, "*Come away with Me. Be still. Rest.*" True rest isn't about how much time you spend on a hammock or how many naps you take—though those can be blessings, too. It's about where your soul finds its home.

Think about the way light works in summer. It shines brighter, longer, and warmer. It doesn't strain or struggle to shine—it simply pours out because that's what it was created to do. In the same way, when we abide in Jesus, His rest flows into us naturally. We don't have to chase it or manufacture it. We simply position ourselves in His presence, and His peace becomes the atmosphere of our days.

One of the most beautiful things about summer is how it reminds us of God's provision. Gardens grow without our anxious striving. Flowers bloom without our micromanaging.

The sun rises and sets every day without us lifting a finger. And if creation itself can rest in God's design, then surely we can, too.

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Rest is not laziness—it's obedience. It's trusting that God is God, and we are not. It's releasing the illusion that everything depends on us. When we choose to rest in Him, we are declaring with our actions, *"Lord, I trust You to hold all things together."*

So, as summer unfolds around you, give yourself permission to breathe. Take a walk at sunset and let the colors remind you of His artistry. Sit quietly with your Bible in the morning and let the stillness restore your soul. Eat your meals slowly, savoring both the food and the company. Build little pauses into your day—moments where you set aside the burdens you carry and take Jesus at His word: *"Come to me...and I will give you rest."*

This season of light is a gift, not a race. Don't let it pass you by without letting it do its deeper work: reminding you that the same God who paints the skies with summer sunsets longs to refresh your heart with His rest.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. What burdens are you carrying into this summer season that Jesus is asking you to lay down?
2. How do you usually measure a "good summer"—by how much you accomplish, or by how deeply you rest in Christ?
3. What small daily rhythms could you build into your summer to pause and receive Jesus' rest (e.g., porch time, walks, quiet Bible reading)?

4. How does the longer summer light remind you of God's constant presence?
  
  5. What would it look like to trust God more fully with your responsibilities, so you can rest without guilt?
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## A Season of Light

The first light of summer morning slipped quietly into the bedroom before I even opened my eyes. The soft glow pushed its way past the curtains, warming the room in a way that whispered, *time to rise*. I lingered in bed for a moment, listening. The ceiling fan ticked gently overhead, and from outside came the sound of a bird who believed it had been chosen to wake the world.

Sliding out from under the sheets, I padded across the cool floor and into the kitchen. The house was still, the kind of quiet that only happens before everyone else has found their way into the day. I filled the coffeepot and pressed the button, the familiar gurgle filling the silence as the air grew heavy with the comforting smell of coffee.

While it brewed, I pushed open the back door and stepped onto the porch. The grass glistened with dew, and the morning air held that soft freshness that disappears by midday. A rabbit darted across the yard, vanishing into the garden as though it knew I was watching. I sat down with my steaming mug and let the warmth rest between my hands. The world was just beginning to stir, and I found myself whispering a quiet thank-you for another day.

It didn't take long before the stillness was broken by footsteps. One of the boys stumbled in, his hair a wild mess and his eyes still half-closed.

"Morning," I said with a smile.

"Is there cereal?" he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

"In the pantry," I nodded. "But sit a minute—you're up early."

He sat beside me, yawning, and pointed toward the rabbit that reappeared near the fence. "I think that's the same one from yesterday," he said.

"Could be," I answered. "Looks like it's claimed our garden as its own."

Soon the rest of the house woke. The kitchen filled with chatter, laughter, and the clatter of cereal bowls. Some wanted eggs instead, so I cracked a dozen into a skillet while toast popped and juice glasses filled. The table buzzed with stories—dreams from the night, jokes, and half-made plans for the day.

"Can we ride bikes after chores?" one asked.

"Only if you help hang the laundry," I answered.

Another piped up, "Can we go to the pool later?"

"Maybe," I said, "but the garden needs water first."

Breakfast ended in the usual blur of crumbs and chatter, but together we tidied up—dishes rinsed, counters wiped, floors swept. Summer days feel freer, but there's always that rhythm of home that carries us.

By midmorning we stepped outside. The sun was climbing higher, already warming the yard. The hose uncurled across the grass, and watering the garden quickly turned into play. The kids took turns spraying the tomatoes, marigolds, and basil plants, laughing as the mist blew back onto their legs. One of them

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“accidentally” aimed too high and soaked a sibling, and before I knew it, they were squealing and running, shirts damp and feet slipping through wet grass. I laughed and shook my head, grateful for a warm sun that could dry what the hose made wet.

I paused by the garden, clipping a handful of basil and a sprig of rosemary, tucking them into my basket for supper. The smell clung to my hands, earthy and sharp. Bees hovered lazily near the blossoms, and I thought how summer seems to hum even when no one is speaking.

Around noon, the heat pressed stronger. We carried lunch outside—simple sandwiches stacked with turkey and cheese, a bowl of potato chips, and wedges of watermelon piled high. Sitting under the shade tree, we ate while the cicadas started their steady song. Juice dripped down chins, seeds flew into the grass, and napkins couldn’t keep up with sticky fingers.

“Bet I can spit a seed farther than you,” one of the boys challenged.

“Oh no you don’t,” I said quickly, remembering last year’s contest that nearly landed seeds on the siding. “Out toward the fence if you must, not the house!”

They laughed and lined up anyway, turning it into a game. I shook my head but smiled—summer had a way of making even lunch a kind of event.

After we cleared the plates, I announced, “Quiet hour.” Groans filled the air, but they knew the rule. The heat of the afternoon called for slowing down. Some grabbed books, others journals or puzzles. One curled up on the couch with a sketchpad. I poured myself a tall glass of

iced tea, set my book on my lap, and let the fan stir the heavy air. Before long, my eyelids gave in, and I drifted into a light nap, lulled by the chorus of cicadas outside.

When I woke, the light had shifted, stretching long shadows across the floor. The kids were stirring again, voices rising as they gathered ideas for the evening. I changed the laundry, carrying a basket of clean sheets out to the clothesline. They flapped like banners in the breeze, white and bright against the blue sky. Standing there, I breathed in deeply, grateful for simple chores that rooted me to the season.

By late afternoon, it was time to start supper. "Let's do a cookout," I suggested, and cheers rang out. We pulled the grill from the garage, set up a tray with patties ready to sizzle, and husked corn straight into a basket.

A pot of beans bubbled on the stove inside, their sweet, smoky aroma filling the kitchen. Deviled eggs chilled in the fridge, waiting to be placed on a platter.

"Can I flip the burgers?" one of the boys asked, spatula already in hand.

"Not yet," I laughed. "They need to cook through first."

Neighbors caught the scent of the grill and wandered over. "Smells amazing," one said, leaning on the fence.

"Grab a plate," I called. "There's always enough."

Soon the picnic table overflowed—burgers stacked high with lettuce and tomato, corn steaming, beans ladled hot, deviled eggs disappearing as quickly as I set them down. Conversation bubbled, children darted through

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the sprinkler, and laughter rose in easy waves. The sun dipped low, painting the sky in shades of peach and rose, as fireflies flickered like sparks in the yard.

Dessert was simple but perfect—strawberry shortcake layered with fresh berries and cream, followed by scoops of homemade vanilla ice cream churned earlier in the day. Sticky fingers, stained lips, and happy sighs told me no one was leaving hungry.

As darkness deepened, lawn chairs and blankets appeared. The kids stretched out on the grass, naming constellations with more confidence than accuracy, while the adults leaned back, talking quietly under the stars. A guitar strummed softly, and voices joined in, not polished but warm and true.

By the time the last plate was stacked in the sink and the neighbors headed home, the yard was quiet again. I stood on the porch one last time, looking out. The grass was damp with dew, the fireflies still blinking in the distance, and the air heavy with the scent of charcoal and cut grass.

Inside, I tidied the kitchen, set the dishwasher to hum, and turned off the lights one by one. The children's laughter still echoed faintly in my mind as I walked down the hallway, checking on each room. Windows cracked, fans turning, soft breathing—signs of a day well lived.

At my dresser, I opened my journal and wrote a few simple words: *Coffee on the porch. Garden watered. Seed-spitting contest. Burgers on the grill. Fireflies. Ice cream.* I closed it with a quiet smile.

Summer days at home are never perfect, but they are precious. They are filled with the kind of light that lingers long after the dishes are done and the porch light clicks off. They remind me that the best moments are often the simplest—the ones that can't be bought or scheduled, only savored. And as I slipped into bed, the sheets cool against my skin, I whispered another thank-you. Tomorrow would bring its own light, its own rhythm, its own grace. For tonight, there was only rest.

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## **Activities & Traditions**

Summer has a way of opening our doors and slowing our pace all at once. The days are long, the light lingers, and even ordinary chores feel different in the sunshine. My children don't always remember the exact trips we took or the lists of projects I hoped we'd finish, but they do remember the feel of wet grass under their feet, sticky watermelon at the picnic table, and the way fireflies looked in jars on the porch railing.

These small things become traditions—done again and again, even if we don't call them that at the time. When I look back, I realize they've been the anchors of our summers: the quiet habits and playful moments that stitched together the seasons of their childhood.

Here are some of our simple, cozy traditions for summer at home. They don't require money, just a little willingness to pause and enjoy what's already around you.

### **Porch Time in the Morning**

The day feels different when you start it outside. I love carrying my coffee onto the porch before the heat sets in. The kids sometimes join me with a glass of juice or a slice of toast, pointing out rabbits in the garden or listening for the first cicadas. It's a gentle start that reminds us to notice before the rush begins.

### **Watermelon Seed-Spitting Contest**

This one makes us laugh every single year. After we slice into a big, juicy watermelon, the kids line up in the yard and see who can spit a seed the farthest. It's never about who wins—it's about the squeals, the mess, and the memory of summer afternoons where sticky hands don't matter.

## **Watering the Garden (and Each Other)**

Technically it's a chore, but with kids and a hose, it becomes a game. They water the basil and tomatoes for a minute, then end up spraying their feet, or each other, or even me when I least expect it. By the end, we're all laughing, damp, and the plants are happy.

## **Hanging Laundry on the Line**

There's something about fresh sheets on a clothesline that feels like summer. The kids help me pin them up, and the fabric snaps in the breeze. Later, when we crawl into bed, everyone notices. "The sheets smell like sunshine," one of them usually says. That's a tradition all on its own.

## **Quiet Hour in the Afternoon**

In the hottest part of the day, we pause. Books come out, puzzles spread across the coffee table, sketchpads fill with doodles. Sometimes I even manage a nap with a fan humming nearby. It's not just about keeping cool—it's about teaching the rhythm of rest.

## **Backyard Cookouts**

We don't need a holiday to fire up the grill. Sometimes it's just burgers and corn, but gathering outside, smelling the charcoal, and sitting around the picnic table makes it feel special. Neighbors wander over, kids dart through sprinklers, and suddenly an ordinary evening becomes a celebration.

## **Firefly Catching at Dusk**

When the first tiny lights blink across the yard, the children grab jars and dash out to chase them. Their laughter fills the twilight, and even the teenagers, who roll their eyes at first, usually end up catching one or two. Watching them glow in cupped hands is a tradition I hope never fades.

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## **Stargazing on Blankets**

We end the day stretched out in the grass, pointing out constellations. Some we know, some we make up. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we're together, the air has cooled, and the sky reminds us how small we are and how big God is.

## **Comfort Foods for Summer**

When the season shifts to summer, I find myself craving foods that are simple, fresh, and easy to share. These aren't complicated dishes. They're the ones that show up at picnics, on back porches, and at family cookouts — the meals that say "summer is here." My kids don't talk about the fancy meals I may have tried to make. They remember the sticky watermelon, the corn dripping with butter, and the evenings we ate burgers with the smell of charcoal still on our hands.

Here are the recipes that feel like summer at home.

### **Homemade Lemonade**

Every summer begins with a pitcher of lemonade. I don't know if it's the tartness that wakes us up or the sweetness that cools us down, but it's the drink that belongs to this season. My kids love stirring the sugar water in the pitcher, sneaking sips when they think I'm not looking, and floating lemon slices on top "because it looks fancy."

#### **Ingredients:**

- 1 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice (about 5–6 lemons)
- 1 cup sugar
- 5 cups cold water
- Ice and lemon slices for serving

#### **Directions:**

1. Make a simple syrup by heating 1 cup water with sugar until dissolved.
  2. Stir together lemon juice, sugar syrup, and remaining 4 cups water in a pitcher.
  3. Chill well and serve over ice with lemon slices.
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## **Classic Potato Salad**

Potato salad is one of those dishes that shows up at every summer table. Everyone makes it a little differently, but this version has been my family's favorite. The kids joke about who gets the first scoop, and I always have to remind them, "There's plenty — it's potato salad!" Creamy, tangy, and familiar, it never lasts long.

### **Ingredients:**

- 3 lbs potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon yellow mustard
- 3 hard-boiled eggs, chopped
- ½ cup celery, finely diced
- ½ cup onion, finely diced
- 2 tablespoons sweet pickle relish
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Paprika for garnish

### **Directions:**

1. Boil potatoes until tender, drain, and cool slightly.
2. Stir mayonnaise, mustard, celery, onion, relish, salt, and pepper together.
3. Fold in potatoes and eggs gently.
4. Chill before serving; sprinkle with paprika.

## **Grilled Burgers with Fixings**

If there's one food that feels like summer, it's a burger hot off the grill. Everyone has their own way of topping it — some pile everything on, others stick to ketchup only — but the best part is standing around outside, waiting for them to come off the flame. My boys love "testing" one before I call everyone to the table, and somehow there's always a bite missing before I set down the platter.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 lbs ground beef (80/20 blend works best)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 6–8 hamburger buns
- Toppings: lettuce, tomato, onion, pickles, cheese, condiments

### **Directions:**

1. Mix beef with salt, pepper, garlic powder, and Worcestershire. Form patties.
  2. Grill 4–5 minutes per side until cooked through.
  3. Serve on buns with all the toppings set out so everyone can build their own.
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## **Homemade Vanilla Ice Cream**

We don't always wait for birthdays or holidays to make homemade ice cream. Sometimes it's just a Tuesday, and the kids beg to pull out the ice cream maker. They love watching it churn, peeking under the lid, and asking, "Is it ready yet?" by the tenth minute. When it's finally scooped into bowls, the wait is forgotten. It tastes like summer itself.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 cups heavy cream
- 2 cups whole milk
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

### **Directions:**

1. Whisk all ingredients until sugar dissolves.
2. Churn in ice cream maker according to directions.
3. Freeze to firm up, or enjoy soft straight from the bowl.

## **Corn on the Cob (Boiled or Grilled)**

Fresh corn is the one thing I can't leave at the farmers' market. Whether it's boiled simply in salted water or charred on the grill, it always ends the same way — butter dripping down wrists and everyone asking for "just one more ear." Even the pickiest eater at my table doesn't argue with corn in the summer.

### **Ingredients:**

- 6 ears fresh corn, husked
- Butter and salt for serving

### **Directions (Boiled):**

1. Boil corn in salted water 5–7 minutes. Drain.
2. Serve hot with butter and salt.

### **Directions (Grilled):**

1. Brush corn lightly with butter.
  2. Grill over medium heat, turning often, until lightly charred.
  3. Serve with extra butter and salt.
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## **Deviled Eggs**

No summer picnic feels complete without a plate of deviled eggs. They disappear faster than I can make them. I always laugh when one of my kids says, "I'll just have one," and then comes back for two more.

### **Ingredients:**

- 6 hard-boiled eggs, peeled
- 3 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 1 teaspoon yellow mustard
- 1 teaspoon pickle relish
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Paprika for garnish

### **Directions:**

1. Halve eggs and mash yolks with mayo, mustard, relish, salt, and pepper.
  2. Spoon mixture back into whites.
  3. Dust with paprika before serving.
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## **Baked Beans**

Baked beans are the dish that stretches a cookout into a meal. Sweet, smoky, and bubbling from the oven, they round out everything else on the table. I like to top them with bacon, and the kids always argue over who gets the piece that crisps the most.

### **Ingredients:**

- 4 cups canned baked beans
- ½ cup brown sugar
- ½ cup ketchup
- 2 tablespoons mustard
- ½ cup chopped onion
- 4 slices bacon, chopped

### **Directions:**

1. Stir beans, sugar, ketchup, mustard, and onion in a dish.
2. Scatter bacon on top.
3. Bake at 350°F for 45–50 minutes, until bubbling and browned.

# Strawberry Shortcake

This dessert is pure summer nostalgia. My kids beg to help slice strawberries, mostly because they sneak as many as they put in the bowl. When the biscuits come out of the oven golden and warm, we pile them high with berries and cream. It's messy, sweet, and gone before the platter even cools.

## Ingredients:

- 2 cups strawberries, sliced
- ¼ cup sugar
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup cold butter, cubed
- ¾ cup milk
- 1 cup whipped cream

## Directions:

1. Toss strawberries with sugar and set aside.
  2. Mix flour, baking powder, and salt. Cut in butter. Add milk and stir just until dough forms.
  3. Drop onto a baking sheet and bake at 425°F for 12–15 minutes.
  4. Split biscuits, layer with strawberries and cream, and serve right away.
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## Closing Thoughts

Mama, summer doesn't need to be grand or expensive to matter. The memories our children hold on to are almost always the simple ones: the sticky hands from watermelon, the damp towels drying in the sun, the laughter over a seed-spitting contest, or the soft hush of crickets while lying on a blanket under the stars.

These small things are not wasted. They are the threads that weave together a season. They remind us that God's goodness isn't only in the big events — it's in the quiet rhythms of daily life. Every ray of sunlight, every evening firefly, every shared meal around the picnic table is another way He whispers, "*I am here. Rest in Me.*"

You don't have to plan a perfect summer. You don't have to fill every day with something extraordinary. You only need to show up, notice, and let your home be a place where love and laughter can grow. Your children may forget which chore list you wrote or what projects you finished, but they will remember the way summer felt in your home — light-filled, welcoming, and at peace.

So this season, let yourself slow down. Drink the lemonade on the porch. Let the corn drip butter down your wrist. Chase the fireflies, even if you feel too old. And when the day closes, whisper thanks to the One who gave it to you. That's what makes a summer holy.

## Reflection Questions

1. What simple summer tradition from your own childhood do you want to pass down to your family?

2. Where do you feel God inviting you to pause and notice His presence this season?
  3. Which of the activities in this chapter could easily fit into your family's current rhythm?
  4. How can you make ordinary meals (like burgers, corn, or baked beans) feel like a celebration in your home?
  5. What does "resting in the light" look like for you — both physically and spiritually — this summer?
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## Chapter 2 — Creating Cool Comfort Indoors

### **Scripture (NLT):**

*"You are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble. You surround me with songs of victory." — Psalm 32:7*

### **Devotional Reflection**

When summer is at its hottest, we naturally retreat indoors. Ceiling fans hum, curtains are drawn to block the glare, and we reach for something cold from the fridge instead of standing over a stove. These simple acts of creating cool comfort aren't just about temperature — they remind us of the way God invites us to find shelter and rest in Him.

Psalm 32:7 calls God our "hiding place." That word paints such a vivid picture: a safe retreat, a place we can go when the world feels heavy, overwhelming, or just plain exhausting. In summer, our hiding places might be an air-conditioned room, a chair pulled close to a fan, or even the shady side of the porch.

Spiritually, our hiding place is always the same: the presence of God.

Think about the relief of stepping out of the blazing sun into a cool house. Your body immediately relaxes. You breathe differently. The weight of the heat lifts, and you feel able to move again. That's what God's presence does for our souls. He doesn't always remove the "heat" of our circumstances, but He shelters us in a way that lets us breathe, rest, and keep going.

Jesus understood this need for retreat. We read often in the Gospels that He slipped away to pray — not because He was weak, but because He was wise. He

knew that to continue pouring out, He had to step into the Father's presence and be refreshed. If the Son of God needed that hiding place, surely we do too.

Creating cool comfort indoors can become a spiritual practice when we see it this way. Preparing light meals that don't overburden the cook reminds us that God's provision is never heavy or complicated — it's daily bread, given with ease. Breezy home care, like keeping laundry simple or meals fresh, points us back to the truth that God doesn't ask us to strive endlessly. He asks us to abide.

Sometimes, though, we resist the hiding place. We think rest is indulgent or lazy. We convince ourselves that productivity is more holy than pause. But what if pausing to cool down — physically and spiritually — is an act of trust? When you sit with a glass of iced tea and let the house quiet around you, you're declaring:

*God, I trust You to keep the world spinning while I rest. Isaiah 25:4 says, "You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat."*

That verse makes me think of summer days when shade feels like salvation. You don't have to do anything — just stand in it — and suddenly you can breathe again. God Himself is that shade for our souls.

So what does it look like, practically, to create cool comfort indoors? It might be keeping meals light and fresh: crisp salads, fruit chilled in the fridge, sandwiches piled with tomatoes straight from the garden. It might be dimming the lights in the hottest part of the

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afternoon, letting the house stay quiet and calm. It might be encouraging everyone to pause for a nap, a book, or simply lying still under the hum of a fan. These aren't just household tricks — they're invitations to let your home reflect God's sheltering love.

I think of Mary and Martha when Jesus visited their home. Martha was flustered with preparations, and Mary chose to sit at His feet. Jesus gently reminded Martha that "only one thing is necessary." He wasn't condemning her for caring about the meal — but He was showing her that presence matters more than performance. In our homes, especially in summer, we can fall into the same trap: thinking every meal has to be impressive, every corner spotless. But the truth is, what our families need most isn't perfection. They need presence. A cool place to rest. A mama who knows how to slow down.

This week, let your home become that hiding place — not because it's perfectly kept, but because it's filled with peace. Keep the meals simple. Let the fans run. Choose lighter loads of housework if it means your spirit stays lighter too. And most of all, make space for your soul to sit in the shade of God's presence.

The same God who designed summer with its blazing sun also designed the gift of shade. He knew we would need both. He knew we'd need the joy of long days and also the relief of quiet retreat. Trust Him to provide both for you this season.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. Where do you most tangibly feel God as your "hiding place" in daily life?

2. How can you create physical “shade” in your home this summer — little spaces that feel restful and cool?
  3. Which chores or expectations could you simplify so your home feels lighter, not heavier, in this season?
  4. What light meals remind you of God’s simple daily provision?
  5. How can you remind yourself that rest is not laziness, but trust in God’s care?
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## Creating Cool Comfort Indoors

The morning sun slipped through the blinds before I was ready, and even in those early hours I could feel the warmth settling into the house. Summer days in the South don't wait politely until noon to get hot—they begin their climb the moment the sun is up. I lay there for a few breaths, listening to the steady hum of the ceiling fan, before pushing back the covers and stepping onto the cool floor.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator buzzed quietly, the one appliance I was most grateful for in the heat of July. I set the coffee to brew, then filled a glass pitcher with slices of lemon and water, sliding it into the fridge so it would be cold by midmorning. That little step had become my routine on hot days—something cheerful to reach for when the air grew heavy.

Before the children stirred, I walked through the house pulling curtains closed against the eastern sun. "Keep the cool in, keep the heat out," my grandmother used to say, and she was right. A few box fans hummed quietly in the corners, moving air from one room to another, and I turned them on low to get the house breathing.

The first sleepy child appeared just as the coffeepot finished. His hair stuck out like he'd been wrestling dreams all night, and he rubbed his eyes with both fists. "Morning," I whispered, sliding a bowl of yogurt topped with granola and blueberries toward him.

"Mornin'," he mumbled, climbing onto a chair. He spooned slowly at first, then faster once the flavor woke him up.

Before long, the kitchen filled with the shuffle of more feet, the scrape of chairs, and the chatter of hungry voices. I kept breakfast simple—fruit, yogurt, toast with jam—because I knew saving the oven for later would only make the house more comfortable. “Can we go outside today?” one of the boys asked hopefully between bites.

“Not just yet,” I said, glancing at the thermometer already edging upward. “We’ll save outside for after supper, when the sun isn’t so strong. For now, we’ll keep cool in here.”

After breakfast, we tidied the kitchen together. Dishes went into the washer, counters were wiped, and one child swept up the crumbs with slow, exaggerated strokes that made his siblings laugh. I dampened a cloth and ran it over the kitchen table, then filled a shallow bowl with water and lemon peels, setting it in the corner of the counter. It was a little trick I’d learned—natural air freshener that made the whole room smell like sunshine without any effort.

Instead of rushing into chores, I steered everyone toward the living room. “Quiet morning,” I said, pulling blinds halfway shut so the space filled with soft light instead of glare. The kids sprawled across the floor and couches with books, coloring pencils, and sketchpads. I tucked myself into the armchair with my Bible and let the house settle into a hush.

It amazed me, really, how simply adjusting the pace of the morning could change the whole atmosphere. With the fans humming and the curtains swaying, the house felt cooler, calmer, and lighter. My oldest read aloud quietly to a younger sibling, and the sound of turning pages mingled with the rustle of coloring pencils.

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By midmorning, I decided we needed a little project. "Who wants to help make popsicles?" I asked, standing in the doorway. Immediately, chairs scraped and little feet ran toward the kitchen. I pulled out yogurt, orange juice, and a carton of strawberries. The kids helped slice the berries, drop them into molds, and pour the mixture in. More went on the counter than in the molds, but no one minded.

"When will they be ready?" one of the boys asked, licking a drop of yogurt from his finger.

"Not until after lunch," I laughed. "They need time to freeze. But we'll be glad we made them."

Back in the living room, the children turned to building a tower from wooden blocks. I watched as they argued over who had the tallest stack, only to burst into laughter when the whole thing tumbled down. It was the kind of simple play that didn't need screens or schedules—just a cool floor, free time, and imagination.

By lunchtime, the air outside pressed heavy. I kept the stove off and layered sandwiches on a platter: sliced garden tomatoes with mozzarella and basil, turkey piled onto soft rolls, and cucumber rounds tucked into pita with a smear of cream cheese. A big bowl of cherries sat in the center of the table, their stems sticking out like little handles.

"Can I have the tomato one?" my daughter asked, surprising me.

"Of course," I said, handing her a plate. "That's my favorite too."

"Turkey for me," another called, already reaching.

Everyone picked what they liked, and soon the table buzzed with talk and laughter. We carried our plates into the living room, keeping the fans running while we ate. Lunch was light, fresh, and exactly what the day called for.

When the plates were cleared, I kept the afternoon slow. "Just the basics," I reminded them as we straightened the house. Toys were gathered into baskets, blankets folded loosely on the couch, and shoes lined near the door. Nothing perfect, but peaceful enough.

Then came quiet hour. Some stretched out with puzzles, others curled with books. I poured myself a glass of iced tea steeped with mint from the garden, the coolness slipping down like a sigh of relief. I sat near the window where a small breeze drifted through and let the hum of cicadas outside lull me into half-rest. Mid-afternoon hunger stirred again, so I blended up smoothies: frozen bananas, strawberries, and a splash of orange juice. The children crowded close, waiting for their turn. "Don't drink too fast—you'll get a brain freeze," I warned, though I knew at least one would ignore me.

Sure enough, seconds later, my son groaned and clutched his forehead while the others giggled. "Told you," I teased, handing him a napkin.

Later, when the sun softened, I set out supper. Again, no stove required: a big pasta salad tossed with chopped vegetables and feta, a platter of deviled eggs, and a tray of crisp vegetables with ranch. Everyone ate heartily, happy to fill their plates without the heaviness of a hot meal.

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"This is actually really good," one of the boys admitted, surprised.

"See?" I said, laughing. "Cool food can be just as satisfying."

Evening brought the relief we had been waiting for. The air finally shifted, and I called, "Shoes on!" Together, we stepped outside, walking slowly down the road. The cicadas sang in the trees, dogs barked in the distance, and the sky turned shades of coral and lavender.

Neighbors waved from porches, and we waved back. By the time we returned, fireflies were flickering in the grass. The younger ones darted off with jars, chasing them in the dusky light. I pulled the popsicles from the freezer, now solid and brightly colored, and handed them out as we sat on the porch. Sticky fingers, laughter, and the soft hum of crickets wrapped the evening in peace.

The older kids lingered near me, their voices low as they shared dreams for the future. I listened, grateful for the way slow evenings seemed to open hearts. Later, when the house quieted and everyone was in bed, I stood in the kitchen with a glass of water in my hand.

Today hadn't been fancy or full of big accomplishments. It had been simple: sandwiches, puzzles, smoothies, popsicles, a walk at dusk. But in those small things, I felt God's sheltering presence.

I wrote a few words in my journal before bed: "Lemon water. Popsicle project. Cool meals. Evening walk. Fireflies." Just enough to remind me later how good this ordinary day had been.

As I slipped beneath the covers, the sheets cool against my skin, I whispered a prayer of thanks. The world outside could blaze as it wanted; inside, we had found shade in His presence.

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## **Activities & Traditions**

Summer heat can be relentless, but our homes don't have to match the weather outside. With a few simple habits, we can create spaces that feel cool, calm, and refreshing. My children might not remember how many loads of laundry I folded or what chores were finished, but they do remember sitting at the table with cold smoothies, building puzzles under the hum of the fan, or finding a shaded nook to read when the air outside felt too heavy.

These traditions don't require special equipment or extra planning. They are about leaning into the rhythm of summer: keeping things light, breezy, and restful.

### **Popsicle Making Days**

There's something magical about pouring juice, yogurt, or fruit purée into molds and waiting for them to freeze. My children ask every summer, "When can we make popsicles?" It's an activity as much as a treat. The waiting is part of the fun, and when we finally pull them out hours later, the smiles make the sticky counters worth it.

### **Afternoon Smoothie Breaks**

Instead of heating up the oven for a snack, I'll pull out the blender and toss in whatever fruit is on hand—bananas, strawberries, or even frozen peaches. The whir of the blender draws the kids like moths to a flame, and before long we're all sipping something cool and sweet. It's simple, but it turns an ordinary afternoon into something memorable.

## **Puzzle & Game Hours**

When the sun is at its fiercest, we gather around the dining table with puzzles or board games. Sometimes it's a 500-piece challenge, sometimes it's a quick game of Uno. The point isn't winning—it's laughing together, leaning over the table, and forgetting for a while that the outdoors is too hot to enjoy.

## **Indoor Clothesline**

On days when the dryer feels like too much heat, I set up a rack indoors and let the laundry air dry under the breeze of a fan. It isn't glamorous, but the kids love helping hang socks and towels, and the house fills with the clean scent of sun-dried laundry. Little traditions like this show them that homemaking can be gentle and adaptable.

## **Light & Simple Suppers**

Instead of heavy meals, I'll often declare it a "cold supper night." Pasta salads, vegetable trays, deviled eggs, and sliced fruit become a spread that everyone enjoys. These nights teach my children that meals don't have to be complicated to be nourishing—or joyful.

## **Cool Reading Nooks**

One of my favorite traditions is letting the children choose a "summer reading spot." Some drag a chair close to the fan, others pile pillows in the hallway where the tiles are coldest. Giving them freedom to create a nook makes reading an adventure, even if it's just the corner of a room.

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## **Evening Walks**

We save our outdoor time for dusk, when the air softens. Walking slowly as the sky turns pink and lavender is a rhythm that resets us all. Sometimes we talk, sometimes we just listen to the cicadas. The heat lifts, and conversation flows in a way it doesn't always at the table.

## **Porch Popsicle Nights**

When the day winds down, we sit together on the porch with the popsicles we made earlier. Sticky hands, laughter, and the faint glow of fireflies turn it into more than a snack—it becomes a memory. These evenings remind me that joy is often found in repetition, not extravagance.

## Comfort Foods for Summer

When the heat presses down and the last thing you want is a hot stove, it's the light, breezy meals that save the day. These aren't just recipes — they're little traditions that make the house feel cooler and calmer. My kids may not remember the fancier dinners I tried, but they will always remember cucumber sandwiches on the porch, pasta salad in big bowls, or the way popsicles dripped down their wrists while we laughed together.

Here are some of our favorite "cool comfort" foods for summer at home.

### Fresh Garden Pasta Salad

This is the dish I bring out when the fridge is full of odds and ends — a little cucumber here, a pepper there, some leftover olives or cheese. Tossed together, it becomes a bright, cheerful meal that tastes like the garden. It's also perfect because you can make it ahead and let it chill until supper.

#### Ingredients:

- 1 box rotini or bowtie pasta
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 cucumber, diced
- 1 bell pepper, chopped
- ½ cup black olives, sliced
- 1 cup cheese cubes (cheddar or mozzarella)
- 1 cup Italian dressing
- Salt & pepper to taste

#### Directions:

1. Cook pasta until al dente; drain and rinse under cold water.
  2. In a large bowl, toss pasta with vegetables, olives, and cheese.
  3. Stir in dressing, season, and chill for at least 1 hour before serving.
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## **Cucumber Sandwiches (or Pita Pockets)**

These little sandwiches feel fancy but take just minutes to make. Cool, crisp cucumbers with soft bread or pita make the perfect summer lunch. Sometimes we even cut them into triangles and serve them as “tea sandwiches” for fun.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 cucumber, thinly sliced
- 8 slices soft white or wheat bread (or 4 pita pockets)
- 4 oz cream cheese, softened
- 1 teaspoon dill (fresh or dried)
- Salt & pepper to taste

### **Directions:**

1. Mix cream cheese with dill, salt, and pepper.
2. Spread on bread or inside pita halves.
3. Layer cucumber slices and press gently together.
4. Cut sandwiches into halves or quarters and serve chilled.

## **Chicken Salad Lettuce Wraps**

This recipe comes out when I have leftover chicken and want something light. Wrapped in crisp lettuce leaves, it feels fresh, cool, and surprisingly filling.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 cups cooked chicken, diced
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 1 celery stalk, diced
- 1 green onion, sliced
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- Salt & pepper to taste
- Large lettuce leaves (romaine or butter lettuce)

### **Directions:**

1. In a bowl, mix chicken, mayo, celery, onion, mustard, salt, and pepper.
2. Spoon onto lettuce leaves, fold, and enjoy.
3. Serve with fruit on the side for a simple, no-heat meal.

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## **Caprese Salad (Tomato, Mozzarella & Basil)**

This dish is as pretty as it is delicious. The colors alone look like summer on a plate, and the fresh basil makes the whole kitchen smell wonderful.

### **Ingredients:**

- 3 ripe tomatoes, sliced
- 8 oz fresh mozzarella, sliced
- Fresh basil leaves
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar (optional)
- Salt & pepper to taste

### **Directions:**

1. Arrange tomato and mozzarella slices on a platter, alternating with basil leaves.
  2. Drizzle with olive oil (and balsamic if desired).
  3. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Serve immediately.
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## **Cold Tuna Macaroni Salad**

This one reminds me of old-fashioned church picnics. It's creamy, cool, and always a crowd-pleaser. The kids love it because it feels like pasta and sandwiches rolled into one dish.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 cups elbow macaroni
- 1 can tuna, drained
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons relish
- 1 celery stalk, chopped
- 1 hard-boiled egg, chopped (optional)
- Salt & pepper to taste

### **Directions:**

1. Cook macaroni; drain and rinse with cold water.
  2. Stir together pasta, tuna, mayo, relish, celery, and egg.
  3. Season with salt and pepper. Chill before serving.
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## **Fruit & Yogurt Parfaits**

This is one of the easiest ways to turn a snack into something special. Layers of fruit, yogurt, and granola make it look like dessert, but it's healthy enough for breakfast.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 cups vanilla yogurt
- 2 cups mixed fruit (berries, peaches, or melon)
- 1 cup granola

### **Directions:**

1. In clear glasses, layer yogurt, fruit, and granola.
2. Repeat until full.
3. Serve immediately, or chill for later.

## Homemade Smoothies

Smoothies are the sound of summer in my blender. The kids gather like I'm performing magic, and everyone wants to press the button. They're colorful, refreshing, and endlessly adaptable.

### Ingredients (base):

- 2 bananas (fresh or frozen)
- 2 cups frozen fruit (strawberries, peaches, or mixed berries)
- 1 cup milk or juice
- ½ cup yogurt (optional for creaminess)

### Directions:

1. Blend all ingredients until smooth.
  2. Pour into glasses and serve with a straw.
  3. Experiment with flavors—mango, pineapple, or blueberry are all favorites here.
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## Homemade Popsicles

The joy of homemade popsicles is that you can make them from almost anything: juice, yogurt, or blended fruit. My kids love helping pour them into molds and waiting for the freezer to do its work.

### Ingredients:

- 2 cups fruit juice or blended fruit (like strawberries, watermelon, or peaches)
- ½ cup yogurt or coconut milk (optional for creamy pops)
- Honey or sugar to taste (if needed)

### Directions:

1. Blend ingredients until smooth.
  2. Pour into popsicle molds (or paper cups with sticks).
  3. Freeze 4–6 hours until solid.
  4. Run molds under warm water to release before serving.
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## Closing Thoughts

Mama, summer doesn't have to mean exhaustion or endless activity. Sometimes the holiest thing you can do is lower the blinds, stir up a cool salad, and invite your family to slow down with you. A breezy home isn't about spotless rooms or elaborate meals — it's about creating a space where everyone can breathe a little easier, where the weight of the heat and the rush of life pause at the door.

Your children will carry these small things with them. They'll remember the sound of the blender whirring for smoothies, the way popsicles dripped down their arms, the cool sheets at bedtime, and the peace of quiet hours in a shaded room. These aren't just household tricks — they're a ministry of comfort. Every time you choose light over heavy, rest over striving, you're showing them a glimpse of the God who calls Himself our hiding place, our shade, our rest.

So don't discount the power of simplicity. A sandwich and some fruit can preach God's goodness just as clearly as a feast. A fan humming in the corner can remind your family that rest is welcome here. And a mama who chooses to trust God with her to-do list can fill her home with the kind of peace that lingers long after the summer heat is gone.

Let your home be that refuge. Not perfect, not Pinterest-ready, but cool, calm, and filled with love. Because in the end, that's the memory your children will treasure: not that you kept the house spotless, but that you kept the atmosphere gentle.

## Reflection Questions

1. How can you make your home feel like a “hiding place” for your family during the hot, busy days of summer?
  2. Which light meals or cool traditions could you begin this season that would bring joy without adding stress?
  3. What expectations or chores can you simplify so that your spirit stays light and breezy, too?
  4. When was the last time you felt God’s presence as refreshing as shade on a hot day?
  5. How might you invite your children to see rest not as laziness, but as a gift from God?
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## Chapter 3 — Summer's Table

### **Scripture (NLT):**

*"Taste and see that the Lord is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him!" — Psalm 34:8*

### **Devotional Reflection**

There's something special about a summer table. Maybe it's the bright bowls of fruit, maybe it's the garden vegetables carried in still warm from the sun, or maybe it's the way the picnic blanket spreads wide enough for everyone to have a place. Whatever it is, food in summer seems to taste different. Fresher. Simpler. More like a gift than a production.

Psalm 34:8 invites us to "taste and see that the Lord is good." It's an invitation that engages all our senses. Not just hearing His Word, not just believing in our minds, but actually experiencing His goodness — tasting it, savoring it, carrying it into our bodies until it becomes part of us. Summer meals make this verse come alive.

A sun-ripened tomato, a slice of melon, or a handful of berries straight from the vine doesn't just feed us — it testifies to the goodness of the One who created it. But our tables aren't only about food. They are about people. Every summer meal, whether on a porch, a picnic blanket, or around a simple kitchen table, is an opportunity to gather. And in that gathering, God shows up. He shows up in laughter shared between friends, in a child's sticky fingers reaching for "just one more," in neighbors pulling up an extra chair. These ordinary gatherings become holy when we recognize them as gifts from Him.

It's easy, though, to forget this in our rush. We can turn even a picnic into a performance — worrying about

having enough, making things look pretty, stressing over whether anyone will notice the mismatched plates. But Jesus reminds us that it isn't about the tableware; it's about the fellowship. When He broke bread with His disciples, it was ordinary bread, passed around a simple table. Yet it was holy, because He was present.

This summer, what if you looked at your table — whether it's a blanket spread on the grass, a picnic bench at the park, or your everyday dining table — as a place of worship? Not because of the meal itself, but because of what happens when people gather around it.

When you sit and share, when you listen and laugh, when you let the food be simple so the conversation can be rich, you are living out Psalm 34:8. You are tasting and seeing His goodness.

I think of Jesus feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fish. He didn't host a banquet. He simply gathered what was available, blessed it, and shared it. The miracle was not in the menu but in the multiplication. Our summer tables don't need to be impressive; they need to be faithful. They need to open up whatever we have — a basket of sandwiches, a bowl of garden vegetables, a jug of cold lemonade — and trust that God will use it to nourish not only bodies but hearts.

And isn't that the point? That our homes and tables become places where people leave feeling full in more ways than one? Where they leave not only with their stomachs satisfied but with their souls reminded that God is good and His people are kind.

So this summer, don't be afraid to keep it simple. Slice the watermelon. Pack the picnic. Invite the neighbors

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even if all you have is peanut butter sandwiches. Let your children eat with sticky hands and messy faces. Laugh too loudly. Tell the stories you've told before. And in the middle of it all, remember: this is holy. This is sacred. This is what it means to taste and see His goodness.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. How have you experienced God's goodness through food and fellowship in past seasons?
2. What holds you back from inviting others to your table — fear of "not enough," worry about appearances, or something else?
3. How could you simplify meals this summer so you can focus more on people than on preparation?
4. When was the last time you felt God's presence at an ordinary gathering?
5. What step can you take this week to make your table — indoors or outdoors — a place of welcome?

## Summer's Table

The morning began with sunlight spilling across the kitchen floor, warm but gentle. I had opened the back door early, letting in the cool air before the heat of the day arrived. From the garden came the faint buzz of bees and the steady chatter of birds. I tied on my apron, already thinking about what we might gather from the garden for the day's meals.

The children were slower to wake, worn out from the late summer nights we'd been keeping. When they finally stumbled in, hair tousled and eyes still sleepy, I was already rinsing tomatoes in the sink.

"Are those for lunch?" one asked, pointing to the basket filling quickly with red, orange, and yellow fruit.

"Some for lunch, some for supper, and maybe a few for snacks," I smiled. "The garden is generous today."

Breakfast was simple: slices of toast with butter and jam, a bowl of melon cubes, and glasses of cold milk.

We ate at the kitchen table with the windows open, enjoying the breeze before it disappeared for the day. Between bites, the children made plans.

"Could we take a picnic to the park?"

"What if we invite the neighbors?"

"Can we make dessert too?"

I laughed, nodding. "One at a time. Yes, we can picnic. Yes, we can invite friends. And yes, we'll make dessert."

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That was enough to send them scattering—some to finish chores, others to gather blankets and baskets. I lingered in the kitchen, jotting down what we'd need: pasta salad, cucumber sandwiches, fruit, lemonade, and a pan of bars cooling on the counter before we left.

By midmorning, we were in the garden. The sun was higher now, but the soil still held the coolness of morning. We picked cucumbers, snapping them gently from the vine, and filled another basket with green beans. Basil leaves perfumed the air as we brushed against them. My youngest proudly carried in a small basket of cherry tomatoes, careful not to spill them even though half had already been eaten on the way.

"Don't eat them all before we get inside," I teased.

"But they taste better out here," she insisted, cheeks round with another bite.

Inside, the kitchen became a small factory of preparation. One child chopped cucumbers while another rinsed strawberries. I stirred pasta into a colander, the steam fogging the window briefly before vanishing. Music played softly from a speaker, and we moved in a kind of rhythm, bumping into each other now and then but laughing instead of grumbling.

The pasta salad came together quickly—bowtie noodles tossed with tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, and cubes of cheese, drizzled with Italian dressing until everything glistened. Cucumber sandwiches were stacked on a tray, crusts cut off to make them easier for little hands. A large container of lemonade chilled in the fridge, condensation beading on the outside of the pitcher.

Dessert was the last thing to prepare. I had promised bars, so we stirred together a pan of lemon squares,

the tart scent filling the kitchen as they baked. By the time they came out, golden and dusted with powdered sugar, the baskets were packed and the children were tugging at the screen door.

“Ready?” I called.

“Ready!” came the chorus.

We loaded everything into the van and drove to the park. The grass was lush, the trees tall, and the picnic tables blessedly shaded. Friends and neighbors met us there, carrying their own dishes to share—fried chicken, potato chips, a bowl of fruit salad. We spread everything across the table until it looked like a feast.

The children darted off immediately, climbing the play structure, chasing each other across the field, and shrieking when the sprinkler system suddenly turned on. Shoes were abandoned, socks forgotten, and their laughter carried all the way across the park.

We adults sat in folding chairs, balancing paper plates on our laps, and settled into conversation. At first, the talk was light—gardens, vacations, how quickly the summer was passing. One neighbor asked about the tomatoes in my basket, another about the herbs by the back fence. We traded recipes and tips, nodding and smiling as the cicadas hummed overhead.

Lunch stretched into something more than a meal. Between bites of pasta salad and fried chicken, the conversation turned deeper. Someone shared about a health scare, another about a child’s struggles, and we found ourselves listening, nodding, encouraging. A picnic table had become a sanctuary, food and fellowship working together to knit hearts closer.

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At one point, a neighbor pulled out a guitar and strummed softly while others sang along. The songs weren't rehearsed or polished, but they filled the air with warmth. Children came back, drawn by the music, sitting cross-legged in the grass as if they knew something important was happening.

After everyone had eaten their fill, we gathered the children back to the table for dessert. They licked powdered sugar from their fingers, passing around lemon bars, and asked if they could go play again. With a nod, they ran off, their laughter trailing behind them.

The day lingered in that golden way only summer can. The sun slanted through the trees, casting long shadows across the grass. The hum of cicadas filled the pauses in our conversation. I looked around at the faces—friends, family, neighbors—and felt the quiet contentment of knowing this was enough. Not a fancy meal, not a perfect party, but the kind of gathering that left you full in every way.

When the heat finally began to fade, we packed up the baskets and said our goodbyes. "Next time at our place," one friend promised, and I smiled, knowing the cycle of simple hospitality would continue.

At home, the kitchen bore the marks of the morning—crumbs on the counter, dishes stacked, a faint dusting of flour still near the mixer. I didn't mind. They were reminders of the day, proof that food had been shared and memories made.

The children, though tired, begged for just a little more. "Can we have watermelon on the porch?"

I laughed, cutting a melon into wedges. We carried them outside, sitting together on the steps. Juice dripped down our chins, seeds spit into the grass, and even though we were full from the picnic, somehow watermelon still had room.

As the children tumbled into bed later, sun-kissed and weary, I lingered on the porch with a final glass of lemonade. The stars blinked awake one by one, and the house grew still. I thought of Psalm 34:8—*taste and see that the Lord is good*—and realized the day had been one long reminder of that truth. We had tasted fresh food, yes, but also friendship, laughter, and God's presence woven through it all.

And in that moment, with the night air cooling and the glass sweating in my hand, I felt it deeply: the goodness of God, right here at summer's table.

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## **Activities & Traditions**

Summer meals don't just happen at the table inside — they spill out into yards, porches, parks, and picnic blankets. Over the years, I've learned that the food itself is only part of the memory. The real joy comes in the traditions we wrap around it — gathering people, slowing down, and letting the season remind us how simple food and fellowship can be.

Here are some of the ways our family makes the most of summer's table.

### **Garden-to-Table Meals**

There's something deeply satisfying about eating what you've just picked. A tomato still warm from the sun, cucumbers crisp and cool, or beans snapped fresh into a bowl — they taste different when you know they came from your own soil. We try to include at least one thing from the garden in every summer meal, no matter how small. It's a way of honoring God's provision right outside our back door.

### **Backyard Picnics**

Not every picnic needs a park. Some of our best memories are from spreading a blanket right in our own backyard. The kids run barefoot through the grass between bites, and the meal feels instantly special just because we ate it under the sky. It's proof that you don't have to go far to create a memory.

### **Neighbor Suppers**

Summer evenings seem to invite company. Sometimes it's as simple as waving a neighbor over when they catch the scent of something on the grill. Other times, we plan a potluck and watch the table overflow. The joy is in the mix — everyone bringing what they have, everyone leaving a little fuller than when they arrived.

## **Sunday Sandwich Suppers**

When the day has been long and hot, nothing feels better than keeping supper simple. We pile the table with bread, sliced meat, tomatoes, cheese, pickles, and spreads, then let everyone build their own. Somehow, letting each person create their plate makes it fun instead of plain, and the lack of fuss leaves space for more conversation.

## **Picnic Basket Traditions**

I keep one basket always ready in summer — stocked with napkins, cups, and a blanket. That way, when the idea of a picnic pops up, we aren't scrambling. The kids know this basket means adventure, even if it's just sandwiches at the local park. Over time, it's become a symbol of summer freedom.

## **Dessert on the Porch**

We've made it a habit to end long summer days with something sweet outside. Sometimes it's watermelon, sometimes ice cream, sometimes lemon bars or cookies. The point isn't the dessert itself but the rhythm of gathering on the porch, sticky fingers and all, while the evening cools.

## **Storytelling at the Table**

When we gather friends and family, I like to start conversations by asking a question: "What's your favorite summer memory?" or "What was the best picnic you ever had?" Before long, the table is full of laughter, stories, and connections across generations. Food fills the stomach, but stories feed the heart.

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## **Blessing the Leftovers**

After big summer gatherings, there are almost always leftovers. Instead of storing them all, we've made it a tradition to share some. A neighbor receives half a pan of bars, a friend goes home with extra pasta salad. It keeps the food from going to waste and reminds everyone that the table extends beyond our own home.

## Comfort Foods for Summer

When I think of summer gatherings, I don't picture fancy meals. I picture paper plates sagging under piles of picnic food, hands reaching for "just one more," and neighbors laughing as kids run barefoot in the grass. These are the foods that anchor those memories — simple, fresh, and meant to be shared.

### Classic Coleslaw

Coleslaw always finds its way to the table when we gather. Crisp, creamy, and just a little tangy, it pairs perfectly with fried chicken, burgers, or sandwiches. I usually make a big bowl because it disappears quickly, even if some claim they "don't like cabbage."

#### Ingredients:

- 1 medium head green cabbage, shredded
- 2 carrots, grated
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper

#### Directions:

1. In a large bowl, toss cabbage and carrots together.
  2. In a small bowl, whisk mayonnaise, vinegar, sugar, salt, and pepper.
  3. Pour dressing over cabbage mixture and toss to coat.
  4. Chill at least 1 hour before serving so flavors blend.
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## **Fresh Tomato Bruschetta**

When the garden overflows with tomatoes, this is one of my favorite ways to use them. Served on slices of toasted bread, it feels fancy but comes together in minutes. It's often the first appetizer gone at a picnic.

### **Ingredients:**

- 4 ripe tomatoes, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- ¼ cup fresh basil, chopped
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 baguette, sliced and toasted

### **Directions:**

1. In a bowl, combine tomatoes, garlic, olive oil, vinegar, basil, salt, and pepper.
2. Toast baguette slices until crisp.
3. Spoon tomato mixture over bread just before serving.

## **Three-Bean Salad**

This colorful salad is a picnic classic. It keeps well, travels easily, and seems to get better after sitting in the fridge a while. Sweet, tangy, and hearty — it's summer in a bowl.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 can green beans, drained
- 1 can garbanzo beans, drained
- 1 can kidney beans, drained and rinsed
- ½ cup onion, thinly sliced
- ½ cup vinegar
- ½ cup sugar
- ¼ cup oil
- ½ teaspoon salt

### **Directions:**

1. In a large bowl, combine beans and onion.
  2. In another bowl, whisk vinegar, sugar, oil, and salt until dissolved.
  3. Pour dressing over beans and toss.
  4. Cover and chill at least 4 hours or overnight.
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## **Picnic Fried Chicken (Oven-Baked Version)**

Every good summer table needs fried chicken. I often make mine in the oven for ease. It's crispy, juicy, and can be eaten hot or cold — which makes it perfect for a picnic basket.

### **Ingredients:**

- 8 pieces chicken (drumsticks or thighs work well)
- 2 cups buttermilk
- 1½ cups flour
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ cup oil or melted butter

### **Directions:**

1. Soak chicken in buttermilk for at least 2 hours (or overnight).
2. Preheat oven to 400°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment.
3. Mix flour, paprika, garlic powder, salt, and pepper.
4. Dredge chicken in flour mixture, shaking off excess.
5. Arrange on baking sheet and drizzle lightly with oil or butter.
6. Bake 35–40 minutes, until golden and crispy.

## **BLT Sandwiches with Garden Tomatoes**

The first truly ripe garden tomato deserves a BLT. Crisp bacon, cool lettuce, and juicy tomato slices come together in a way that no store-bought tomato could ever imitate.

### **Ingredients:**

- 8 slices bread, toasted
- 8 slices bacon, cooked crisp
- 2 large ripe tomatoes, sliced
- 4 leaves romaine lettuce
- Mayonnaise, for spreading

### **Directions:**

1. Spread mayonnaise on toasted bread.
  2. Layer with lettuce, bacon, and tomato.
  3. Top with remaining bread slices and cut in half.
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## **Watermelon Feta Salad**

This may sound unusual, but trust me — sweet watermelon with salty feta and fresh mint is one of the most refreshing summer salads. It's perfect for hot afternoons when nothing else sounds good.

### **Ingredients:**

- 4 cups watermelon cubes
- 1 cup feta cheese, crumbled
- ¼ cup fresh mint leaves, chopped
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- Juice of 1 lime

### **Directions:**

1. In a large bowl, combine watermelon, feta, and mint.
  2. Drizzle with olive oil and lime juice.
  3. Toss gently and serve chilled.
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## **Peach Cobbler**

Few desserts say “summer” like warm peach cobbler with a scoop of ice cream. It’s the kind of dish that fills the house with sweetness and brings everyone running to the kitchen.

### **Ingredients:**

- 4 cups sliced fresh peaches (or drained canned peaches)
- 1 cup sugar, divided
- ½ cup butter, melted
- 1 cup flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup milk

### **Directions:**

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Pour melted butter into a 9x13 dish.
2. In a bowl, mix flour, ½ cup sugar, baking powder, salt, and milk. Pour over butter (do not stir).
3. In another bowl, toss peaches with remaining ½ cup sugar. Spoon over batter.
4. Bake 40–45 minutes, until golden and bubbly. Serve warm.

## Lemon Bars

Portable, tart, and sweet — lemon bars are the dessert I almost always pack for a picnic. They cut neatly, travel well, and taste like sunshine.

### Ingredients:

- 1 cup butter, softened
- ½ cup sugar
- 2 cups flour
- 4 eggs
- 2 cups sugar
- ⅓ cup lemon juice
- ¼ cup flour
- Powdered sugar for dusting

### Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Mix butter, ½ cup sugar, and 2 cups flour. Press into a greased 9x13 pan.
  2. Bake crust 15 minutes.
  3. Whisk eggs, 2 cups sugar, lemon juice, and ¼ cup flour. Pour over crust.
  4. Bake another 20–25 minutes. Cool completely.
  5. Dust with powdered sugar before cutting into squares.
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## Closing Thoughts

Mama, the beauty of summer meals is not in how perfectly they're planned but in how freely they're shared. A garden tomato sliced onto bread, a plate of fried chicken at a picnic table, a wedge of watermelon passed between sticky hands — these are the kinds of simple foods that carry the weight of memory. They whisper to your children, *home is enough, family is enough, God's goodness is enough.*

The table, whether it's set with china or paper plates, is never really about the food. It's about what happens when hearts gather around it. Laughter is shared. Stories are told. Burdens are lightened. And in those ordinary, unpolished moments, we catch glimpses of the extraordinary — the presence of God in the middle of everyday life.

Your family won't remember if the pasta salad was perfectly dressed or if the fried chicken turned out crisp enough. But they will remember that you sat beside them, that you listened, that you welcomed others to join in. They'll remember late-night watermelon on the porch, lemon bars dusted with sugar, and the way the house smelled when peaches baked in the oven.

So don't let comparison steal your joy. Don't feel the weight of Pinterest-perfect spreads. Instead, let your summer table be a place of freedom — where neighbors pull up a chair, where children laugh until bedtime, and where you yourself can pause long enough to taste and see that the Lord is good.

## Reflection Questions

1. How do you see God's goodness reflected in the foods that grow fresh in summer?

2. What holds you back from inviting others to your table more often — and how might God be inviting you to release that?
  3. What's one simple dish you could make this week to share with neighbors, friends, or family?
  4. When you look back on your own childhood summers, what foods or gatherings stand out most?
  5. How can you teach your children that the table is more about presence and fellowship than about perfection?
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## Chapter 4 — Evenings Outdoors

### **Scripture (NLT):**

*"The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship." — Psalm 19:1*

### **Devotional Reflection**

There is something holy about summer evenings. The day finally loosens its grip, the heat softens, and the sky begins to paint itself in colors no artist could fully capture. The children run barefoot in the grass while fireflies blink like tiny lanterns, and before long, someone pulls out a chair or a blanket and says, "Let's sit a while."

I've learned over the years that some of the best conversations happen not around a polished table but under the wide sky. Something about the dusk makes us open up, maybe because the pressure of the day is gone and the night invites honesty. Around a campfire or lying on our backs watching stars, words tumble out that never seem to surface at the dinner table.

Psalm 19:1 says, *"The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship."* When we sit outside on a summer evening, we are invited to listen to that proclamation. Every streak of color at sunset is a brushstroke of His glory. Every constellation is a reminder that He holds the universe in His hands. And every cool breeze after a long, hot day is His whisper of refreshment.

I sometimes think of Abraham, who God led outside to look at the stars. God didn't give him a lecture about promises. He simply told him to look up. *"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to*

*number them... so shall your offspring be*" (Genesis 15:5). The stars themselves became the sermon, the visual reminder of God's faithfulness. How often do we miss the sermons written in the sky because we don't take the time to look up?

Evenings outdoors have a way of shifting our perspective. When I'm sitting around a campfire, I'm reminded how small my worries are compared to the vastness of the sky above me. The same God who hung the stars is the One who orders my days. The same Lord who paints the sunset is the One writing my story.

And there's something about firelight too. A campfire gathers people close, draws faces into its glow, and slows us down. The crackle of wood, the warmth on our skin, the smell of smoke clinging to our clothes — all of it presses pause on the rush of life. Jesus Himself cooked fish over a fire for His disciples after the resurrection (John 21). That little fire became the setting for restoration and renewed calling. Maybe our own campfires, humble as they are, can become spaces of restoration too — places where forgiveness is offered, encouragement is spoken, and hope is rekindled.

Then there's the gift of silence. Out under the stars, words aren't always necessary. Sometimes just sitting side by side, wrapped in blankets, is enough. Crickets sing, the fire pops, the sky stretches wide, and peace settles in. In those moments, I remember that prayer doesn't always need to be spoken aloud. Sometimes it's just the lifting of our hearts to God in gratitude, letting the quiet become our worship.

I want my children to remember these evenings. Not for the marshmallows (though those help) or for the games we sometimes play, but for the stillness and wonder. I

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want them to grow up knowing that God speaks not only in sermons and songs but also in sunsets and starry skies. That His glory isn't confined to Sunday morning but pours out every evening when the sky fades from gold to indigo.

So, Mama, don't underestimate the power of evenings outdoors. Even if the day has been hard, even if the house is still messy, even if you feel weary — step outside. Watch the sunset. Light the firepit. Lay a blanket in the grass and look up. Let the heavens preach to you. Let the stars remind you of promises too big for you to count. And let the quiet refresh your soul the way only God can.

Because in the end, summer evenings are more than just the close of a hot day. They are invitations. Invitations to wonder. Invitations to worship. Invitations to remember that the God who made the heavens is the same God who holds you in His care tonight.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. When was the last time you let yourself simply sit and watch a sunset without distraction?
2. What worries feel smaller when you look up at the night sky?
3. How might gathering around a fire become a space for deeper conversations in your family?

4. In what ways do you sense God's glory in creation when you're outdoors at night?
  
  5. What small tradition could you begin this summer to help your family slow down and notice the heavens proclaiming God's glory?
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## Evenings Outdoors

The day had been long and hot, the kind of August heat that settles over everything like a heavy blanket. Even the dog stretched himself across the coolest tile in the house and refused to move. Fans whirred in every corner, and the curtains stayed pulled against the sun, but still, the air felt thick.

By late afternoon, the children were restless. Books and board games had passed some of the time, but their energy was bubbling just under the surface. "Can we go outside yet?" they kept asking, peeking through the blinds as if the sun might suddenly decide to set early. I checked the sky. The shadows were growing longer, and a faint breeze stirred the trees. For the first time all day, the air carried a hint of relief. I smiled. "Yes," I said. "Tonight's the night for a campfire."

Cheers erupted, and within minutes the house shifted from sluggish to bustling. Shoes were tugged on, the firepit checked, sticks gathered for roasting. I ducked into the kitchen and began pulling together what we'd need — hot dogs, buns, condiments, jars of pickles, and of course the s'mores kit: marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate bars stacked neatly. The children spotted the bag of marshmallows and immediately cheered louder, as though that one bag guaranteed the night's success.

Before the fire, though, came chores. "Wood first," I reminded, and they scattered across the yard, dragging branches, filling buckets with sticks, laughing at who found the "biggest log." Someone tried to balance three pieces at once and toppled over, and the yard rang with laughter. It wasn't fast or efficient, but it was joy-filled, and the pile grew steadily.

By the time the fire caught, the sun was melting toward the horizon, painting streaks of orange and pink across the sky. The first curl of smoke rose upward, carrying that familiar, comforting scent of summer evenings. Chairs and blankets circled the firepit, and the crackle of flames pulled us closer.

Dinner was simple — hot dogs roasted over the fire. The children skewered theirs and leaned in, faces glowing in the firelight. “Mine’s burning!” one cried, jerking back a stick with a hot dog flaming at the end.

We all laughed as siblings teased, offering advice. “You have to turn it slow!” “Don’t stick it in the middle of the flames!” Another held theirs up triumphantly, perfectly browned, already sliding it into a bun with ketchup dripping down the side.

We ate with sticky fingers and mustard smears, passing the jar of pickles around, the crunch echoing in the quiet. The food wasn’t fancy, but around the fire, it tasted like a feast. There’s something about eating outdoors — maybe it’s the smoky flavor, maybe it’s the laughter woven into every bite, but somehow it always feels better than anything I could have served indoors.

When the plates were cleared, the children’s eyes shifted immediately to the marshmallow bag. “Now?” one whispered hopefully. I laughed, handing it over. Flames flickered, sparks spiraled into the deepening sky, and marshmallows puffed and blistered over the fire. Some turned out golden and perfect, others burst into flames, and still others were eaten half-warm, long before they ever reached the chocolate.

“My way’s the best,” one child declared proudly, holding up a perfectly golden marshmallow.

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“Burnt is better!” another argued, waving one that was charred black.

I let them debate, smiling as chocolate smeared across their faces and graham crackers crumbled in their laps. The first s’more was assembled — marshmallow stretching in long strings, chocolate melting into every corner — and before long, sticky fingers and happy sighs were everywhere.

“This is the best part,” one of the boys said through a mouthful, and no one disagreed.

As the sugar high settled, the fire burned lower, the light dimmer but still warm. Fireflies began to blink across the yard, tiny lanterns darting between trees.

The children dropped their sticks and darted after them, jars in hand, squealing when one escaped, cheering when one was caught. I leaned back in my chair, the fire crackling softly, and breathed in the night air. After the heat of the day, the cool breeze felt like a blessing. When the jars were set aside, glowing faintly in the grass, I spread blankets in the yard. “Stargazing time,” I whispered, and they followed, giggling as they flopped down beside me.

The sky had deepened into velvet black, and stars pricked through like tiny diamonds. “That one’s brighter,” my daughter pointed, eyes wide.

“That’s Venus,” I told her. “One of the planets. God made it shine so we’d notice.”

We lay there, pointing and naming. Some constellations we knew, others we invented — dragons, ice cream cones, even a rocket ship. The children argued good-naturedly, but in the end, everyone’s version stayed.

Imagination makes room for everyone.

After a while, the chatter slowed. The quiet settled in, full but peaceful. Crickets sang, the fire popped softly, and the sky stretched wider than words. My youngest curled close, slipping her hand into mine.

"Do you think God sees us out here?" she asked softly. "Yes," I said, squeezing her hand. "He sees us, and He delights in it. Just like He made the stars, He made us to shine for Him. And when we sit here and notice His sky, it's like saying thank-you."

Her eyes reflected the starlight. "Then I'm saying thank-you tonight."

The weight of her words lingered long after. None of us were in a hurry to leave. We lay there until eyelids drooped and blankets pulled tighter, until the fire was only embers and the night had cooled.

Carrying sleepy children inside, brushing teeth with marshmallow still clinging to lips, tucking them under sheets that smelled faintly of smoke — it all felt like holy work. These are the things they'll remember: sticky fingers, firelight on faces, the hush of stars overhead.

When the house finally quieted, I stepped back outside for one last look. The embers glowed faintly, fireflies blinked across the yard, and the heavens stretched endless above me. I whispered a prayer of thanks — for the food, the laughter, the conversations, and the reminder that God's glory fills not only sanctuaries but summer skies.

Later, before bed, I opened my journal and wrote: *Hot dogs by the fire. Marshmallow smiles. Stars like*

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*promises. Thank-you, Lord.*

I closed it with a quiet sigh, slipping into bed with smoke still clinging faintly to my hair. And as sleep came, it wasn't exhaustion I felt but wonder — the kind of wonder that only comes from an evening outdoors, wrapped in God's handiwork.

## **Activities & Traditions**

Summer evenings carry their own rhythm. The heat finally loosens its grip, the sky softens into color, and the whole family seems to exhale. These are the hours when we gather closer, not around screens or schedules, but around firelight, fading sunsets, and the wide expanse of the stars.

Here are some of the traditions that have made our evenings outdoors not just fun, but unforgettable.

### **Firepit Suppers**

Nothing turns an ordinary night into an adventure like eating by the fire. Hot dogs roasted on sticks, foil packets of potatoes tucked into the coals, or even grilled corn held in smoky hands — somehow it all tastes better outside. The food is simple, but the memory lingers long after the plates are cleared.

### **Sunset Watching**

We've made it a habit to pause at sunset, even if just for a few minutes. Sometimes it's on the porch, sometimes lying in the grass, but always with the same instruction: "Look up." Each evening feels like a new masterpiece painted across the sky, and the children race to see who can spot the first color change.

### **S'mores and Stories**

The promise of marshmallows keeps everyone close to the fire, but it's the stories that keep us talking long after the s'mores are gone. We tell tales from childhood, laugh over old family memories, or let the children make up wild stories of their own. Sticky fingers and laughter go together just fine.

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## **Water Balloon Fun**

When the summer heat feels almost unbearable, a bucket of water balloons can turn the day around in a hurry. Fill up a big tub with colorful balloons, set it in the yard, and let the laughter begin. Kids love the thrill of dodging and chasing, and parents can join in too for an instant memory-maker. If you don't want a full free-for-all, set up little challenges instead: toss balloons back and forth to see who can go the longest without dropping one, aim at a target like a bucket or chalk circle, or line up for a relay where each person carries a balloon on a spoon. However you do it, you'll end up with squeals of delight, lots of giggles, and probably a few soggy shirts. And the best part? Once the game is over, the sun dries everything quickly, leaving behind nothing but happy memories.

## **Blanket Stargazing**

Spreading blankets across the grass has become a summer ritual. We point out constellations, invent new ones, and let the sky start conversations that wouldn't happen indoors. Sometimes we just lie in silence, the quiet broken only by crickets, and it feels like prayer without words.

## **Campfire Singing**

No one in our family sings in perfect harmony, but around a fire, that doesn't matter. We hum old hymns, try campfire songs from memory, and sometimes just make up silly tunes. The firelight softens voices and turns the night into something sacred, even in its imperfection.

## **Late-Night Porch Talks**

When the fire burns low and the younger ones are tucked into bed, I often find myself sitting on the porch with one of the older kids. The conversations that come at that hour — about dreams, doubts, or just life in general — are the kind that stick. The porch light becomes a beacon for honesty and connection.

## **Ending with Gratitude**

Before heading inside, we've started a little tradition: one person names something they're thankful for from the evening. Sometimes it's as simple as "marshmallows" or "catching two fireflies at once," and sometimes it's deeper — "the stars reminding me that God is big." It's a small habit, but it frames the whole night in thankfulness.

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## **Comfort Foods for Summer**

Summer evenings around the fire don't call for fancy meals. They call for food you can eat with your hands, food that tastes better with a little smoke on it, food that gathers everyone close while sparks float into the night sky. These are the dishes that make our campfire nights complete.

### **Roasted Hot Dogs over the Fire**

It doesn't get more classic than this. Somehow a hot dog roasted over the fire tastes like childhood itself. The kids argue over whose is "most perfectly browned," while one always insists that a slightly charred one is the best. Either way, no one leaves hungry.

#### **Ingredients:**

- Hot dogs
- Hot dog buns
- Condiments: ketchup, mustard, relish, onions, pickles

#### **Directions:**

1. Spear each hot dog on a roasting stick.
2. Hold over the fire, turning slowly until browned (or charred, if that's your style).
3. Nestle into buns, add your favorite toppings, and enjoy with smoky fingers.

## **Foil-Packet Potatoes with Onions and Butter**

These little packets might be the unsung heroes of campfire cooking. Tossed together in minutes and tucked right into the coals, they come out soft, buttery, and full of flavor. My kids call them “potato presents.”

### **Ingredients:**

- 4 medium potatoes, diced
- 1 onion, sliced
- 4 tablespoons butter
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Foil

### **Directions:**

1. Lay out squares of foil. Divide potatoes and onions evenly.
  2. Top each with butter, salt, and pepper. Fold foil tightly into packets.
  3. Place packets in the hot coals of the fire for 20–25 minutes, turning once.
  4. Open carefully (watch the steam!) and enjoy straight from the foil.
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## **Campfire Chili**

Chili simmering over the fire feels like the heart of a gathering. This version is hearty but simple, and it can be made ahead and reheated in a Dutch oven right by the flames. Everyone gathers with bowls in hand, adding their favorite toppings.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 lb ground beef or turkey
- 1 onion, diced
- 2 cans chili beans
- 1 can diced tomatoes
- 1 can tomato sauce
- 1 packet chili seasoning
- Toppings: shredded cheese, sour cream, chopped onions

### **Directions:**

1. In a Dutch oven, brown meat and onion over the fire.
2. Stir in beans, tomatoes, sauce, and seasoning.
3. Cover and let simmer 20–30 minutes over the fire, stirring occasionally.
4. Serve hot with toppings and maybe a slice of cornbread.

## **Skillet Cornbread**

A cast-iron skillet makes this golden and crisp around the edges. It's the perfect partner to chili or just eaten warm with butter melting into every crumb. The smell alone draws everyone closer to the fire.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 cup cornmeal
- 1 cup flour
- ¼ cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup milk
- 1 egg
- ¼ cup melted butter

### **Directions:**

1. Grease a cast-iron skillet.
  2. Mix dry ingredients in one bowl, wet in another. Combine and stir gently.
  3. Pour into skillet and set over hot coals or on a grate above the fire.
  4. Cover loosely with foil and bake 20–25 minutes, until golden and firm in the center.
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## **S'mores (Classic & Variations)**

No campfire is complete without s'mores. Everyone has their own method — slow roasting, quick flaming, or straight-to-the-mouth marshmallow eating. We usually start classic and then get creative.

### **Ingredients:**

- Marshmallows
- Graham crackers
- Chocolate bars

### **Directions:**

1. Roast marshmallows over the fire until golden or charred (depending on preference).
2. Sandwich between graham crackers and chocolate.
3. Eat fast before it drips onto your lap.

### **Variations:**

- **Peanut Butter Cup S'mores** — Swap chocolate for a peanut butter cup.
- **Nutella S'mores** — Spread graham crackers with Nutella before adding marshmallow.
- **Salted Caramel S'mores** — Add a drizzle of caramel and a sprinkle of sea salt.

## **Campfire Popcorn**

Popcorn over the fire feels like a bit of magic. Kernels rattle in the foil pouch, then suddenly the bag puffs up and the smell makes everyone grin. It's cheap, fun, and disappears almost as soon as it's ready.

### **Ingredients:**

- ½ cup popcorn kernels
- 2 tablespoons oil
- Salt to taste
- Heavy-duty foil

### **Directions:**

1. Place kernels and oil on a large sheet of foil. Fold into a pouch, leaving room to expand.
  2. Seal edges tightly. Hold pouch over hot coals with tongs, shaking gently.
  3. When popping slows, remove carefully and open. Season with salt.
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## **Grilled Peach Halves with Honey and Cinnamon**

This is one of those desserts that looks fancy but takes minutes. Sweet peaches caramelize over the fire, and the drizzle of honey makes them taste like pure summer.

### **Ingredients:**

- 4 peaches, halved and pitted
- 2 tablespoons honey
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon

### **Directions:**

1. Place peach halves cut-side down on a grate over the fire.
  2. Grill 4–5 minutes until softened and lightly charred.
  3. Drizzle with honey and sprinkle with cinnamon before serving.
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## **Banana Boats**

Banana boats are a family favorite because everyone can build their own. They're messy, gooey, and absolutely worth it. Best eaten with a spoon right from the foil.

### **Ingredients:**

- 4 bananas
- ½ cup mini marshmallows
- ½ cup chocolate chips
- Foil

### **Directions:**

1. Slice each banana lengthwise, leaving the peel on and creating a pocket.
2. Stuff with marshmallows and chocolate chips.
3. Wrap each banana in foil and place in hot coals for 5–7 minutes.
4. Unwrap and eat warm with a spoon.

## Closing Thoughts

Mama, there is something sacred about summer nights spent under the open sky. The dishes may still be stacked in the sink, the laundry may not be folded, but when you step outside into the glow of a fire or the quiet of a starlit sky, you realize none of that matters quite as much. What matters are the faces gathered around you, the laughter that rises unplanned, and the way God paints the heavens each evening just to remind us of His glory.

These evenings won't always look perfect. Marshmallows burn, smoke clings to your clothes, someone trips over a log in the dark. But years from now, your children won't remember the small inconveniences. They'll remember lying on blankets and tracing shapes in the stars, the taste of banana boats eaten with spoons, and the way firelight flickered across familiar faces.

The table inside has its place, but sometimes the best communion happens under the sky. Around a campfire, the walls come down. Words come easier. Even silence feels rich, wrapped in cricket-song and the glow of embers. These are holy hours, because they remind us that God is near — not only in the church pew, but in the fire's warmth, the sunset's brilliance, and the constellations stretched across the heavens.

So light the fire. Spread the blankets. Let the children run barefoot through the dusk. Look up, and let yourself remember: the same God who hung those stars is watching over you. The same God who painted the sunset is writing your story. And He invites you not to rush through the evening, but to rest in wonder.

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## Reflection Questions

- When you think of summer evenings, what memories stand out most from your own childhood?
- How could you make space for more unhurried nights outdoors with your family?
- What conversations have you noticed seem to flow more easily around a fire or under the stars?
- How might you use evenings outdoors as a way to point your children to God's glory in creation?
- What new tradition could you begin this summer — firepit suppers, stargazing nights, or porch talks — that would remind your family to slow down and wonder together?

## Chapter 5 — Family Fun in the Sun

### **Scripture (NLT):**

*"This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it." — Psalm 118:24*

### **Devotional Reflection**

Summer has a way of pulling us outdoors. The days stretch long and golden, and the world itself seems to say, *come outside and live a little slower*. Children splash in sprinklers, neighbors wave from porches, laundry dries on the line, and the hum of cicadas reminds us that life is happening all around.

In this season, fun doesn't always come from big trips or expensive plans. More often, it's tucked into simple traditions and everyday rhythms. A picnic blanket spread under the shade of a tree. Chalk drawings on the driveway. Evening walks with popsicles melting faster than you can eat them. These are the things that fill summer with joy.

Psalm 118:24 reminds us, *"This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it."* That verse is a call to wake up each morning and choose gladness — not because everything will go perfectly, but because the day itself is a gift. God handcrafted each sunrise, each gentle breeze, each moment we're given. And in summer especially, His gifts are scattered everywhere if we pause to notice them.

Sometimes we get caught thinking fun has to be grand to count. We look at other families' vacations, summer camps, or perfectly photographed outings and wonder if we're missing something. But the truth is, children don't measure joy the way adults do. They won't remember if

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they had the fanciest pool float or the biggest trip. What they'll remember is the rhythm of life at home — the way you laughed with them while running through the sprinkler, the taste of cold watermelon on a hot afternoon, the sound of crickets at night.

Jesus often pointed to simple things to reveal deep truths — a mustard seed, lilies of the field, sparrows in the sky. In the same way, summer traditions remind us that joy is not about excess but about presence. The gift of today is enough.

When we choose to step into summer rhythms — watering the garden in the morning, gathering for a backyard meal, walking barefoot through grass, resting in the shade — we're teaching our children something profound. We're teaching them that life with God is not all rush and striving. It's also laughter, rest, wonder, and gratitude.

I think of the Israelites in the Old Testament. God commanded them to celebrate festivals — times of feasting, dancing, and remembering His goodness. These weren't optional extras; they were woven into the rhythm of life. God knew His people needed joy. They needed to mark time not only with work and duty but also with delight.

Family fun in the sun is more than just keeping kids busy — it's part of a holy rhythm. It's showing them that rejoicing is an act of worship. When we laugh together, share meals outdoors, and rest in the warmth of summer, we are reflecting the goodness of the God who made these days.

So, Mama, don't discount the simple things. Blow bubbles in the yard. Watch the sunset with a glass of lemonade in your hand. Let your children run barefoot

and climb trees. Join them in laughter instead of staying on the sidelines. These moments may feel ordinary now, but they will become the treasures your children carry into adulthood.

And when you're tempted to feel like it isn't enough, remember: the Lord made this day. Not tomorrow's trip, not next year's plan — today. The gift is already here, waiting for us to rejoice in it.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. What are the simple summer traditions that already bring joy to your family?
  2. Do you ever feel pressure to make summer "big enough" or "special enough"? How can Psalm 118:24 free you from that pressure?
  3. What everyday rhythms — like evening walks, porch suppers, or popsicles after chores — could you turn into small traditions this year?
  4. How can you invite God into your family's fun, making even simple activities an act of worship?
  5. What would it look like for you to rejoice in *today* instead of worrying about what tomorrow should hold?
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## Family Fun in the Sun

The morning sun filtered through the curtains earlier than anyone wanted, but somehow summer mornings feel softer than the rest of the year. The light was golden, unhurried, almost like an invitation instead of a command. I stirred first, padding into the kitchen where the floor was still cool under my bare feet. Outside, the world was already awake — birds calling, a neighbor's mower starting in the distance, and the steady hum of cicadas that never seemed to rest.

Before long, I heard the shuffle of little feet. One of the boys stumbled in, hair sticking up in all directions, rubbing his eyes.

"Morning," I said softly. "Hungry?"

He nodded, collapsing at the table with a dramatic sigh. Within minutes, the others joined, one by one, all with the same question: "What's for breakfast?"

"Waffles today," I said, and that was all it took for the room to brighten.

The waffle iron hissed and steamed, the smell filling the kitchen until mouths were watering. Bowls of berries, bananas, and whipped cream found their way to the counter, and soon plates were stacked high. Instead of staying inside, we carried everything out to the porch.

There's something different about eating breakfast outdoors, the way the cool air mixes with the warmth of syrup and steam from mugs. Bare feet dangled from chairs, sticky fingers reached for extra berries, and laughter bounced against the porch railings.

After breakfast, we moved into the rhythm that grounds

our days: chores before play. Beds were made — or something close enough to count. Towels and sheets were carried to the clothesline, flapping like flags in the breeze. Floors were swept while the dog followed hopefully behind, catching crumbs. It wasn't perfect, but it was enough. Summer chores never last too long, because everyone knows fun waits just around the corner.

By midmorning, the house was buzzing with restless energy. "Can we turn on the sprinkler?" came the question, asked more than once until finally I gave the nod. The children flew out the door, dragging the hose across the lawn. The sprinkler sputtered, then sprang to life, sending arcs of water glistening in the sun.

Shoes were kicked off, swimsuits were pulled on, and the yard erupted with squeals. The littlest danced in the spray, chasing the rainbow it cast across the grass. The older ones dared each other to run through at full speed, shrieking when the cold water hit. Even the teenagers, who had insisted they were "too old" for such things, eventually joined in, sprinting through the arcs with arms flung wide, laughter spilling behind them.

I sat in a lawn chair, book in hand, though I barely read a page. Watching them was better than any story. Their joy was contagious, and soon I kicked off my own sandals, walking barefoot across the grass, feeling the cool mist kiss my ankles.

When the sun climbed higher and the heat pressed heavier, I called everyone to the porch. Towels draped over shoulders, hair plastered to faces, they trudged up, still laughing. On the table waited thick slices of

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watermelon, their pink flesh glistening. We ate with abandon, juice dripping down arms, seeds spit into the grass.

“Bet I can spit mine farther than you,” one of the boys bragged.

“Not toward the house!” I warned, and they laughed, lining up to see who could reach the farthest into the yard. Sticky fingers, pink smiles, and laughter — it was summer captured in one messy, beautiful moment.

The afternoon settled into something slower. The heat of the day pressed down, and we spread a blanket under the shade tree. Books were opened, sketchpads filled with doodles, journals scribbled in. One child traced shapes in the clouds, another lay with eyes closed, listening to the hum of cicadas. I poured a glass of iced tea and leaned back, letting the breeze cool my face. For a while, the only sounds were pages turning and birds rustling through the branches.

Later, the driveway became a masterpiece. Buckets of chalk were tipped out, colors spilling everywhere. The children crouched low, sketching suns, flowers, hopscotch grids, and wild patterns that stretched across the concrete. By the end, the driveway was no longer plain gray but a patchwork quilt of imagination. Their hands, legs, and faces carried streaks of color, proof of the fun.

“Take a picture,” one demanded proudly, and I did, capturing not just the artwork but the joy written across their faces.

As the afternoon faded, supper came simple. We built sandwiches stacked with fresh garden tomatoes, crisp lettuce, and slices of turkey. Bowls of chips and jars of

lemonade joined the table outside. Neighbors wandered over, drawn by the laughter, and soon the porch was full. We ate shoulder to shoulder, crumbs scattering onto the floor, stories spilling into the evening air.

The children darted across the yard, popsicles melting down their hands, leaving trails of color on their chins.

Sticky but happy, they collapsed back at the table for seconds, then took off again, racing the setting sun. When the sky deepened, sparklers came out. Tiny flames fizzed and cracked, painting the air with glowing trails. The children traced their names, drew hearts, waved them wildly in circles. Even the older ones, who at first rolled their eyes, soon joined in, laughing as their sparklers sputtered and fizzed. For a few minutes, it felt like we held pieces of the stars in our hands.

Finally, darkness settled, soft and full. We spread blankets across the grass, lying shoulder to shoulder, eyes turned upward. Fireflies blinked across the yard, their small lights echoing the constellations above.

"Look, there's the Big Dipper," one child pointed.

"No, that's a dragon," another argued.

We laughed, but in the quiet moments that followed, questions surfaced. "Do you think God sees us looking up at Him?" one whispered.

"Yes," I answered. "And He loves when we notice His handiwork."

Silence stretched, deep and peaceful. The fireflies pulsed, the crickets sang, and the stars seemed to shine brighter just for us.

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When eyelids grew heavy and yawns grew louder, we carried sleepy bodies inside. Dirty feet, sticky faces, hair smelling of grass and popsicles — none of it mattered. What mattered was the joy, the laughter, the way the day had been lived fully.

Later, when the house was quiet, I opened my journal and wrote: *Waffles on the porch. Sprinkler squeals. Watermelon and chalk. Sandwiches with neighbors. Popsicles and sparklers. Stars and fireflies. Thank You, Lord, for a day well spent.*

And as I slipped under the sheets, tired in the best way, I smiled. Family fun in the sun doesn't need travel or expense. It lives in rhythms — simple, repeating, ordinary things that somehow become extraordinary when done with love. These are the days that stitch themselves into memory, the ones my children will carry long after the chalk has washed away and the popsicle stains have faded.

## **Activities & Traditions**

Summer fun doesn't always require tickets or travel. Some of the best memories are tucked into the everyday rhythms of home. My children may not remember every lesson I taught or every chore list I made, but they will always remember sticky watermelon, chalk-streaked hands, and the sound of sparklers fizzing in the dark. These little rhythms become traditions, shaping the way summer feels in our family.

Here are some of our simple, joy-filled traditions for family fun in the sun.

### **Sprinkler Play in the Yard**

The humble garden hose has provided more entertainment than any toy we've ever bought. With swimsuits on and squeals in the air, the sprinkler becomes a carnival right in the backyard. Some summers it feels like half the neighborhood ends up running through, laughter echoing long into the afternoon.

### **Watermelon Picnics**

Thick slices of watermelon, eaten barefoot in the grass, always taste better than any dessert I could make. We make a game of spitting seeds — carefully away from the house, of course — and the children never fail to laugh until their sides hurt. These sticky afternoons are pure summer.

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### **Driveway Chalk Art**

Our driveway has been everything from a hopscotch course to an art gallery. Buckets of chalk dumped out turn gray cement into a quilt of color. The drawings fade with the rain, but the joy of creating them lingers. Sometimes we take pictures, other times we just let the art live for the day.

### **Porch Suppers**

Evening meals eaten outside taste different. Whether it's sandwiches with neighbors or lemonade in mason jars, the simple act of gathering outdoors makes supper feel like a celebration. The breeze becomes our background music, and the sunset our table centerpiece.

### **Popsicles After Chores**

There's nothing like the promise of a popsicle to motivate kids through morning chores. We keep the freezer stocked with every color, and once the floors are swept and beds are made, sticky rewards wait. The best part is sitting together on the porch, tongues turning blue or red, laughing about whose is melting fastest.

### **Sparklers at Dusk**

When the first fireflies appear, sparklers aren't far behind. The children write their names in the air, draw glowing hearts, and squeal when the sparks fizzle. It's a tradition that never gets old, no matter how many summers pass.

## **Blanket Stargazing**

We spread quilts across the grass, lie back, and let the stars tell their stories. Some constellations we know, others we invent. The younger ones ask big questions about God and the universe, and the older ones sometimes just sit in silence. Either way, it always feels holy.

## **Gratitude at the End of the Day**

Before heading inside, we name one thing we're thankful for. Sometimes it's silly — "extra ketchup on my hot dog" — and sometimes it's deep — "the stars reminding me that God is big." This small ritual closes the day with hearts pointed toward Him.

## **Comfort Foods for Summer**

Summer fun is often fueled by simple food — the kind that doesn't take hours in the kitchen but still brings everyone running to the table. These recipes are picnic-friendly, backyard-approved, and full of the flavors that mark the season.

### **Homemade Lemonade Popsicles**

Every freezer should hold a stash of these in July. They're refreshing, sweet, and easy enough that even the kids can help make them. We pour the mixture into molds, stick in popsicle sticks, and wait impatiently for them to freeze.

#### **Ingredients:**

- 1 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice (about 5–6 lemons)
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup sugar
- 4 cups water

#### **Directions:**

1. Heat 1 cup of the water with sugar until dissolved.
2. Stir in lemon juice and the remaining cold water.
3. Pour into popsicle molds and freeze 4–6 hours until firm.
4. Run warm water over the outside of the mold to release.

## **Fruit Salad with Honey-Lime Dressing**

This salad looks like a rainbow in a bowl. We chop up whatever fruit is on hand — watermelon, strawberries, grapes, pineapple — and drizzle it with a light honey-lime dressing. It disappears quickly, usually before supper is even called.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 cups strawberries, halved
- 2 cups grapes
- 2 cups watermelon cubes
- 2 cups pineapple chunks
- 2 tablespoons honey
- Juice of 1 lime

### **Directions:**

1. Combine all fruit in a large bowl.
  2. Whisk honey and lime juice together; drizzle over fruit.
  3. Toss gently and serve chilled.
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## **Classic Pasta Salad**

Pasta salad is a summer picnic essential. Ours is colorful and flexible — a little pasta, a few veggies, and a tangy dressing. It holds well in the fridge and tastes even better the next day.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 box rotini pasta
- 1 cucumber, diced
- 1 bell pepper, diced
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 cup shredded cheese
- 1 cup Italian dressing

### **Directions:**

1. Cook pasta until al dente, rinse with cold water, and drain.
  2. Toss pasta with vegetables and cheese.
  3. Stir in dressing and chill for at least an hour.
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## Sloppy Joes

Messy? Absolutely. Delicious? Always. Sloppy Joes are one of those meals that bring everyone back to the table for seconds, napkins in hand.

### Ingredients:

- 1 lb ground beef
- 1 onion, diced
- 1 cup ketchup
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon mustard
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 6 hamburger buns

### Directions:

1. Brown beef and onion in a skillet; drain excess fat.
  2. Stir in ketchup, sugar, mustard, and Worcestershire.
  3. Simmer 10 minutes until thickened.
  4. Serve on buns with plenty of napkins nearby.
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## BBQ Chicken Drumsticks

Chicken drumsticks on the grill are a summer tradition. The kids love holding them in their hands, and the smoky, sticky sauce makes them finger-licking good.

### Ingredients:

- 10 chicken drumsticks
- 1 cup barbecue sauce
- Salt and pepper

### Directions:

1. Season drumsticks with salt and pepper.
2. Grill over medium heat, turning often, until cooked through (about 25–30 minutes).
3. Brush generously with barbecue sauce during the last 10 minutes.

## Macaroni & Cheese

Mac and cheese is comfort food in any season, but in summer it often shows up as a picnic side dish. Creamy, cheesy, and baked with a golden crust — it's always the first dish scraped clean.

### Ingredients:

- 1 lb elbow macaroni
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 4 tablespoons flour
- 4 cups milk
- 4 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- Salt and pepper

### Directions:

1. Cook pasta until al dente; drain.
  2. Melt butter in a saucepan; whisk in flour until smooth.
  3. Slowly add milk, whisking until thickened.
  4. Stir in cheese, salt, and pepper until melted.
  5. Combine with pasta, pour into a baking dish, and bake at 350°F for 20 minutes.
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## Rice Krispie Treats

No-bake desserts are made for summer, and Rice Krispie treats top the list. The kids love helping stir the marshmallows, and they vanish almost as quickly as they're cut.

### Ingredients:

- 6 cups Rice Krispies cereal
- 4 cups mini marshmallows
- 4 tablespoons butter

### Directions:

1. Melt butter in a large pot over low heat.
  2. Stir in marshmallows until smooth.
  3. Add cereal and stir until coated.
  4. Press into a greased 9x13 pan; cool before cutting.
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## **Ice Cream Sandwiches**

Homemade ice cream sandwiches feel like the ultimate summer treat. Two cookies with a scoop of ice cream in between — messy, melty, and worth every drip.

### **Ingredients:**

- 24 chocolate chip cookies (homemade or store-bought)
- 1 quart vanilla ice cream
- Sprinkles or mini chocolate chips (optional)

### **Directions:**

1. Scoop ice cream onto the flat side of 12 cookies.
2. Top with another cookie and press gently.
3. Roll edges in sprinkles or chocolate chips if desired.
4. Wrap in plastic and freeze until firm.

## Closing Thoughts

Mama, summer doesn't have to be complicated to matter. The memories that last longest are rarely from the big, expensive outings. They're from sticky watermelon slices eaten on the porch, chalk drawings that cover the driveway, sparklers fizzing at dusk, and children's laughter rising from the sprinkler.

Your family will remember how the season *felt* — light, playful, a little slower, and full of togetherness. They'll remember that you stopped to sit with them on the blanket, that you laughed when the popsicles melted too fast, that you joined in the seed-spitting contest or traced stars in the sky. Those moments stitch themselves into their hearts, reminding them that home is safe, joyful, and full of God's goodness.

Psalm 118:24 says, "*This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.*" That verse is not about a single extraordinary event; it's about the ordinary days — the ones that feel repetitive, simple, or small. Every sunrise and every backyard evening is a gift, waiting to be received with gladness.

So lean into the rhythms of summer. Let the house get a little messy if it means joining your children in the sprinkler. Say yes to popsicles even before dinner. Sit outside long enough to watch the stars blink awake. The chores will still be there, but these moments will not.

Summer's fun is not just about entertainment — it's about joy, and joy is holy work. When you rejoice in the little things, you are living worship. You're teaching your children to see God in the everyday, to look for His fingerprints in laughter, sunlight, and shared meals.

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So breathe deep, mama. Let the season be light, let it be free, and let it point you again and again to the Giver of every good day.

## **Reflection Questions**

- What's one small rhythm you can build into your family's summer days to create joy without pressure?
- Which activity from this chapter (sprinkler play, watermelon picnics, chalk art, porch suppers, popsicles, sparklers, stargazing, gratitude) could you start this week?
- How does Psalm 118:24 ("This is the day the Lord has made...") change the way you see ordinary days at home?
- Where might you be overcomplicating summer — and how can you return to simplicity instead?
- How can you model for your children that rejoicing is not just fun, but worship?

## Chapter 6 — Hospitality in Summer

### **Scripture (NLT):**

*"When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality." — Romans 12:13*

### **Devotional Reflection**

There's something about summer that makes hospitality feel easier, isn't there? The house doesn't need to be spotless when the porch is open, the grill is hot, and laughter is spilling into the yard. Children chase each other barefoot through the grass, neighbors wander over with a smile, and suddenly what could have been just an ordinary evening becomes a gathering.

But if I'm honest, hospitality hasn't always come easy to me. I've wrestled with the pressure of perfection — the thought that my house should look a certain way, the menu should be impressive, and the conversation should flow without awkward pauses. Somewhere along the way, I confused hospitality with entertaining.

Entertaining says, *"Look at me — see how well I've prepared, how polished my home is, how lovely my table looks."* Hospitality whispers something different: *"Come in, sit down, you are welcome here just as you are."*

Romans 12:13 reminds us, *"When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality."*

Notice that Paul doesn't say, "Always be eager to impress." He calls us to be *ready and willing* — to open our doors, our hands, and our hearts. It's less about performance and more about presence.

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Summer has a way of pulling down the barriers we build. Meals can be as simple as hot dogs roasted over a firepit, bowls of fruit on the table, or lemonade poured into mason jars. Guests don't need a five-course spread; they need a place where they feel seen, valued, and comfortable. Sometimes hospitality looks like an invitation planned weeks in advance; other times, it looks like waving to a neighbor and saying, "We're grilling tonight — want to join us?"

I think of Jesus, who was so often found around tables. He accepted invitations and gave them. He dined with the Pharisee and with the tax collector. He multiplied bread and fish for thousands. But what I love most is that His meals were never about food alone. They were about belonging. People left His table changed — not because of the menu, but because of the way He welcomed them.

We can offer that same kind of welcome, even in the simplest of ways. Maybe it's popsicles handed out to the neighborhood kids, or a pitcher of iced tea on the porch while friends stop by. Maybe it's inviting another family to bring whatever they have, and together you share a potluck supper in the backyard. Hospitality doesn't have to drain you — it can actually refresh you when you let go of the need to control every detail.

One summer evening stands out in my memory. We hadn't planned anything, but the kids were playing in the yard, and a neighbor wandered over. Soon another friend dropped by, and within an hour, we were all sitting on the porch sharing whatever food we could scrounge together — chips, watermelon, leftover pasta salad. It wasn't polished, but it was real. We laughed, swapped stories, and lingered until the fireflies came out. To this day, I don't remember what we ate — but I remember the joy of belonging.

Hospitality in summer reminds us that community doesn't happen by accident. It grows when we open the doors, even if the house isn't perfect, even if supper is just sandwiches. Our children learn something powerful when they see us choose welcome over worry. They see that relationships are more important than appearances, that people matter more than spotless floors.

And maybe — just maybe — that's why summer is such a gift. The season itself whispers: *Slow down. Open up. Make room.* We don't have to orchestrate perfection. We just need to show up with love.

So this summer, let's practice easy, joyful hospitality. Set out the paper plates. Grill the drumsticks. Pour the lemonade. Invite the neighbor who might otherwise eat alone. And when someone asks, "Can I bring something?" — say yes. Because hospitality was never meant to be carried alone; it was meant to be shared.

God calls us to be eager to welcome because He knows what happens when we do: lives are knit together, burdens are lightened, and His love is made visible in ordinary kitchens, on porches, and around picnic tables. The house may not be spotless. The food may not be fancy. But the welcome? That's what makes it holy.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. When you think of hospitality, do you picture entertaining (impressing) or welcoming (loving)?
  2. How does Romans 12:13 shift your perspective?
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3. What holds you back from opening your home or porch more often — fear, busyness, perfectionism?
  
4. What's one simple way you could offer spontaneous hospitality this summer, even without much preparation?
  
5. How have you experienced God's love through someone else's hospitality?
  
6. How might you teach your children that true welcome is about presence, not perfection?

## Hospitality in Summer

The morning sunlight filtered through the curtains earlier than usual, spilling golden warmth across the kitchen floor. I padded barefoot across the cool tiles, started the coffee pot, and slipped out onto the porch.

The world was still soft and quiet, with birds calling lazily from the trees and the faint hum of cicadas already beginning their steady song. A neighbor's mower rumbled faintly in the distance, blending into the soundtrack of summer.

I cradled my mug and took a deep breath. These were the moments that grounded me before the house came alive — when the dew still clung to the grass, the sheets on the line snapped gently in the breeze, and the air felt fresh with possibility. I whispered a prayer of thanks for another day, not knowing yet what the day would hold.

Inside, the children were stirring. The thump of footsteps on the stairs, the creak of doors opening, and soon enough, the clatter of cereal bowls and spoons against the counter. Their voices rose and overlapped in a chorus of morning chatter.

"Do we have milk?"

"Where's the peanut butter?"

"Can I sit in your chair? You took my spot yesterday."

I smiled, watching the small chaos of family life play out before me.

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“What’s for breakfast?” one asked, plopping into a chair.

“Cereal today,” I said, pouring milk. “But maybe pancakes tomorrow if you help with the cleanup.”

That promise was enough to satisfy them. Soon chatter filled the kitchen as cereal disappeared, crumbs scattered across the table, and laughter replaced the groggy moods.

After breakfast came chores. Beds were made in lopsided fashion, laundry baskets hauled to the porch, floors swept as the dog trailed behind hoping for crumbs. We fell into the rhythm of work, the kind that feels lighter in summer because it doesn’t carry the same weight as during colder months.

By midmorning, the heat pressed in. I sliced thick wedges of watermelon, setting them out in a bowl, and the children carried them to the porch. Soon they were barefoot on the steps, juice dripping down their arms, seeds spit into the grass with squeals of laughter. “Bet mine went farther!” one shouted, leaning across the railing.

“Not a chance,” another called back, his face sticky with red juice.

I shook my head, laughing. “As long as you’re not aiming at the house, I don’t care who wins.”

It was in that moment, looking out across the yard, that I noticed our neighbor walking her dog. She waved, I waved back, and before I even thought about it, the words came tumbling out:

“Hey, we’re grilling tonight! Want to come over?”

Her face lit up. “We’d love to,” she called back, tugging the dog gently along.

I ducked back inside and grabbed my phone. On impulse, I texted another friend who lived down the road: *Grilling here tonight — come if you’re free.* Within minutes, she replied: *We’ll bring potato salad.*

Hospitality doesn’t always start with a plan. Sometimes it’s as simple as an invitation across the fence or a quick text message that says, *Come as you are. There’s room for you.*

When I told the children, their eyes grew wide. “They’re coming here? Tonight?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “It doesn’t need to be fancy. We’ll keep it simple.”

Excitement buzzed through the house. Suddenly the ordinary day had a new rhythm. Chairs were dragged from the garage, the picnic table scrubbed, the porch swept clear of leaves. One child helped husk corn, piling the green husks high in a basket. Another gathered paper plates and napkins. The littlest followed the dog around, insisting he needed a bath before company came. Laughter floated through the air as the chores turned into something more — preparation with purpose.

In the kitchen, I began assembling what I had. Chicken drumsticks thawed in the sink, later to be brushed with barbecue sauce. Hot dogs waited in the fridge. Bags of chips, a pitcher of lemonade, and a watermelon already cut into thick slices. A plate of brownies, quickly baked and cooling on the counter, added a sweet finish. It wasn’t elaborate, but it was enough.

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By late afternoon, the first scent of charcoal drifted through the air. The grill hissed and crackled as flames licked the grate, sending smoke curling upward. That smell alone seemed to call people together.

Soon, our neighbors arrived, arms full. A big bowl of potato salad, a stack of buns, and a smile that said they were glad to be here. Another family showed up not long after, bringing a jar of pickles and a cooler with extra drinks. The children erupted in cheers, running off together, the sound of their laughter filling the yard.

The adults gathered on the porch, lemonade in hand, stories spilling freely. We swapped updates on gardens, laughed over silly mishaps, and shared memories of summers past. The grill sizzled, hot dogs browned, chicken turned golden with sticky sauce, and corn steamed in its husks. The children darted back and forth, begging for “just one taste” before supper.

At last the food was ready. Plates piled high with hot dogs, chicken, corn, watermelon, chips, and potato salad. Napkins tucked under chins, cups filled with lemonade, seconds taken without hesitation. The table overflowed with more than enough, and the laughter rose just as high.

The children devoured watermelon, holding contests to see who could spit seeds the farthest. Adults joined in the laughter, telling stories, strumming a guitar, humming along to familiar tunes. The whole evening carried a rhythm of ease — no rush, no worry, just presence.

As the sun dipped lower, painting the sky in pink and gold, the children ran barefoot through the sprinkler one last time, shrieking with delight. Popsicles followed,

melting down their hands and staining their lips bright colors.

When the first fireflies blinked, shouts rang out. "They're here!" Jars appeared, and soon the yard was dotted with little lanterns of light, children running, squealing, triumphant with each tiny capture. Even the teenagers, reluctant at first, joined in, their laughter mingling with the younger ones.

Darkness settled, and a small fire was lit in the pit. Chairs circled close, marshmallows skewered and roasted, chocolate and graham crackers passed from hand to hand. Some marshmallows caught fire, others turned golden, but all were eaten with sticky fingers and grins.

The fire crackled, sparks dancing into the night, while voices softened. Stories were shared, songs hummed, silences filled with the steady chorus of crickets. Children stretched out on blankets in the grass, gazing up at the stars.

"Look — that's the Big Dipper," one pointed.

"No, it looks like a dragon," another argued, laughter following.

I leaned back, letting the firelight flicker across my face, and breathed deeply. This was hospitality — not polished perfection, but holy welcome. A table shared, laughter exchanged, memories made.

By the time the last chairs were folded and friends drifted home, the yard was quiet again. The porch bore crumbs, the sink held dishes, the air still smelled faintly of smoke. But my heart was full.

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Later, after the children were tucked into bed and the house stilled, I opened my journal. I wrote: *Neighbors on the porch. Kids in the yard. Food on the table. Fireflies, laughter, stars. Thank You, Lord, for a night of welcome.*

I closed the book, whispered a prayer that our home would always be a place of open doors and easy laughter, and slipped into bed, tired in the best way. Summer hospitality doesn't depend on what you serve, but on who you welcome — and that, I knew, was more than enough.

## **Activities & Traditions**

### **Open-Porch Fridays**

One summer we started a simple tradition: every Friday evening, the porch light stayed on and friends knew they could stop by. Some weeks it was a crowd with chips and laughter spilling everywhere; other times it was just one friend who needed to talk. Either way, it made welcome easy.

### **Driveway Gatherings**

Hospitality doesn't always happen inside. Sometimes we pull lawn chairs into the driveway, let the kids ride bikes up and down, and share bowls of popcorn with whoever shows up. It feels casual, unplanned, and somehow that's what makes it so inviting.

### **Iced Tea Pitcher at the Ready**

In the summer, I keep a big pitcher of tea in the fridge. It's amazing how offering someone a cold glass on a hot day feels like love in liquid form. Guests don't remember the brand of tea — they remember that you thought to refresh them.

### **Board Games on the Porch Table**

We keep a few simple games tucked in a basket, and when friends visit, we set them out. Dominoes, Uno, or checkers have turned ordinary evenings into hours of laughter. Hospitality isn't only about food — sometimes it's about playing together.

### **"Help Yourself" Basket**

To make hosting easier, I set a basket on the counter filled with napkins, utensils, paper plates, and cups. Guests know they don't need to ask — they can help themselves. It takes the pressure off me, and it makes them feel at home.

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### **Cooling Towels and Sunscreen Station**

For daytime gatherings, I keep a little basket by the door with extra sunscreen, bug spray, and damp washcloths tucked in a cooler. It's a tiny detail, but people notice when you've thought of their comfort.

### **Dessert Swap Nights**

Sometimes we invite friends to bring just a dessert — pie, brownies, or even store-bought cookies — and we sit outside with coffee and share sweets. No full meal required, but everyone leaves feeling full and connected.

### **Prayer Before Goodbyes**

One of my favorite traditions is pausing before guests leave, just for a short prayer of thanks. It doesn't have to be long — simply, "Lord, thank You for this evening and for these friends." It reminds everyone that what we shared was more than food — it was fellowship.

## **Comfort Foods**

### **Layered Taco Dip**

This is the dish that always disappears first at summer gatherings. Everyone gathers around it with a bag of tortilla chips, laughing and scooping until the dish is nearly scraped clean. It looks colorful on the table and tastes even better than it looks.

#### **Ingredients:**

- 1 (16 oz) can refried beans
- 1 cup sour cream
- 1 cup guacamole
- 1 cup salsa
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 cup shredded lettuce
- 1 tomato, diced
- ½ cup sliced black olives

#### **Directions:**

1. Spread beans into the bottom of a 9x13 dish.
  2. Carefully layer sour cream, guacamole, and salsa.
  3. Sprinkle with cheese, then top with lettuce, tomato, and olives.
  4. Chill until ready to serve with tortilla chips.
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## **BBQ Pulled Pork Sandwiches**

The slow cooker does all the work for this recipe, leaving you free to tidy the porch or set out the paper plates. By evening, the house smells amazing, and guests line up eagerly for a bun piled high with tender, saucy pork.

### **Ingredients:**

- 3–4 lb pork shoulder
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 2 cups barbecue sauce
- 12 hamburger buns

### **Directions:**

1. Place pork and onion in a slow cooker; pour broth over top.
2. Cover and cook on low for 8 hours until the pork is fall-apart tender.
3. Shred with two forks, drain excess liquid, and stir in barbecue sauce.
4. Serve warm on buns with extra sauce on the side.

## **Veggie Kabobs**

Hospitality doesn't always mean meat. These colorful kabobs make a beautiful addition to the grill, and guests love seeing the variety of vegetables threaded like jewels on a skewer.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 zucchini, sliced thick
- 1 red bell pepper, cubed
- 1 yellow bell pepper, cubed
- 1 red onion, cut into chunks
- 1 pint cherry tomatoes
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- Salt, pepper, and garlic powder to taste

### **Directions:**

1. Thread vegetables onto skewers in colorful patterns.
  2. Whisk olive oil and balsamic together; brush onto vegetables.
  3. Season with salt, pepper, and garlic powder.
  4. Grill over medium heat 8–10 minutes, turning often, until tender and slightly charred.
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## Cheesy Garlic Breadsticks

Every summer meal needs something to round it out, and these breadsticks do the job perfectly. Guests can grab one with their fingers, and the smell of garlic and butter makes them impossible to resist.

### Ingredients:

- 1 loaf French bread
- ½ cup butter, melted
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella
- 2 tablespoons parmesan

### Directions:

1. Slice French bread in half lengthwise.
  2. Mix melted butter and garlic; brush generously over both halves.
  3. Sprinkle with mozzarella and parmesan.
  4. Bake at 375°F for 10–12 minutes until golden and bubbly. Slice into sticks and serve warm.
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## Cucumber Salad

Light and refreshing, this salad is the kind of dish people go back for seconds of without guilt. It's crisp, tangy, and just right for a hot summer evening.

### Ingredients:

- 3 cucumbers, thinly sliced
- ½ red onion, thinly sliced
- ½ cup vinegar
- ¼ cup sugar
- ½ cup water
- Salt and pepper to taste

### Directions:

1. Whisk vinegar, sugar, and water together until sugar is dissolved.
  2. Toss cucumbers and onion with dressing.
  3. Chill for at least 1 hour before serving cold.
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## **Brownie Sundae Bar**

Guests light up when they see this dessert. A tray of brownies paired with ice cream and toppings turns into an activity everyone enjoys. There's no wrong way to build a sundae, and that's half the fun.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 pan of brownies, cut into squares
- 1 quart vanilla ice cream
- Chocolate syrup, sprinkles, nuts, and whipped cream for topping

### **Directions:**

1. Arrange brownies on a platter.
  2. Set out bowls of ice cream and toppings.
  3. Let guests build their own sundaes.
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## **Fruit Trifle**

This dessert looks impressive but couldn't be easier. The layers of cake, pudding, fruit, and whipped cream make it perfect for summer — light, colorful, and big enough to feed a crowd.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 prepared angel food cake or pound cake, cubed
- 2 cups pudding (vanilla or lemon)
- 3 cups mixed fruit (berries, peaches, kiwi, etc.)
- 2 cups whipped cream

### **Directions:**

1. In a large trifle bowl, layer half the cake cubes, pudding, fruit, and whipped cream.
  2. Repeat layers until ingredients are used up.
  3. Chill for 2 hours before serving.
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## **Fresh Fruit Salsa with Homemade Cinnamon Chips**

This recipe always gets attention because it's so unexpected. A big bowl of sweet fruit salsa served with warm, crisp cinnamon-sugar chips feels fun and light — perfect for kids and adults alike.

### **Ingredients (Salsa):**

- 2 cups strawberries, finely diced
- 1 apple, finely diced
- 1 peach or nectarine, diced
- 1 kiwi, peeled and diced
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice

### **Ingredients (Chips):**

- 6 flour tortillas
- 3 tablespoons butter, melted
- ¼ cup sugar mixed with 1 teaspoon cinnamon

### **Directions:**

1. Stir fruit, sugar, and lemon juice together in a bowl; cover and chill.
2. Brush tortillas with melted butter; sprinkle with cinnamon-sugar.
3. Cut into wedges and bake at 350°F for 8–10 minutes until crisp.
4. Serve salsa with chips for dipping.

## Closing Thoughts

Mama, hospitality doesn't have to be polished or perfect. It's not about spotless floors, matching chairs, or five-course meals. True hospitality is about opening what you already have — your porch, your table, your heart — and letting others know they belong.

Summer makes this even easier. The grill, the picnic table, and the long evenings give us natural spaces to welcome friends and neighbors. A bowl of chips and salsa, a tray of brownies, or a pitcher of iced tea is enough to say, "Come in, we're glad you're here."

Guests won't remember the little mess in the kitchen or whether you had fancy dishes. They'll remember the laughter, the smell of food on the grill, and the way your home felt at ease.

Hospitality also teaches our children something sacred: that people matter more than appearances. When they see you pull out extra plates, share popsicles with neighbors, or invite a friend to linger in the yard after dark, they learn that making room for others is part of how we live out the love of Christ.

The Bible reminds us, "*Always be eager to practice hospitality*" (Romans 12:13). It doesn't say "perfect hospitality" or "planned hospitality." Just *eager*. The kind that looks for opportunities to open the door and make space for connection.

So don't let fear or perfectionism hold you back this summer. Put ice in the pitcher, set out paper plates, wave to the neighbor, and say yes when someone offers to bring a dish. Light the candles on the table, or gather around the fire pit, and watch how God fills those simple spaces with joy.

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Your home doesn't have to impress — it only has to welcome. And when you offer that kind of welcome, you reflect the heart of Christ Himself, who invites us all to His table.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. When you think of hospitality, do you tend to imagine entertaining (trying to impress) or true welcoming (making space for others)?
2. What holds you back from opening your home or yard to others more often — fear, busyness, or perfectionism?
3. What's one small way you could show hospitality this week, even without planning ahead?
4. How can you involve your children in practicing simple acts of welcome this summer?
5. What do you want guests to feel when they leave your home — and how can you remind yourself that *presence matters more than presentation*?

## Chapter 7 — Caring for the Soul: Finding Rest in the Long Days

### **Scripture (NLT)**

*"He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name." —  
Psalm 23:2–3*

### **Devotional Reflection**

Summer brings with it long days of sunlight, the kind that stretch far beyond what we expect. Mornings break early with light streaming through the curtains, and evenings linger as fireflies and crickets sing us into night. For some, this feels like freedom — more hours to work in the garden, go on walks, or fit in another gathering with friends. But if we aren't careful, even the gift of long days can turn into another invitation to overflow.

The soul is not renewed by how much we can squeeze into a single day. The soul is renewed by rest — not simply sleep, but the deep rest that comes from being in the presence of the Shepherd. Psalm 23 reminds us that God Himself leads us to green meadows and peaceful streams. Notice the wording: He *lets us rest*.

Rest is not always something we naturally choose. Often we resist it, convinced we have too much to do, too many responsibilities, too many people depending on us. And yet the Shepherd lovingly leads us to places where we can pause, breathe, and let our souls be restored.

Think of summer's invitations to rest. A hammock strung between two trees. A shady spot under a porch

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roof with a book in your lap. A cool glass of water after an hour in the sun. Even a summer thunderstorm that interrupts our plans can become God's gentle reminder: *slow down, let Me refresh you.*

When I look back on my summers as a young mom, I remember how hard it was to actually rest. With children home all day, the house always noisy, and meals constantly needing to be made, rest seemed impossible. I thought soul care would come once the kids were older or once the house was less busy. But the truth is, God doesn't ask us to wait until life is quiet to find Him. He offers renewal in the middle of the noise. Rest might look like five minutes on the porch with your Bible while the kids chase each other in the yard. It might look like whispering a prayer while folding laundry or choosing to close your eyes for ten minutes instead of scrolling your phone. Rest isn't about escaping your life — it's about finding God in the middle of it.

Jesus modeled this for us. Over and over in the Gospels, we see Him slipping away from the crowds to pray, to sit with His Father, to rest in God's presence. If the Son of God Himself needed moments of quiet retreat, how much more do we? Rest was not a luxury for Him — it was necessary for sustaining His ministry.

In the same way, rest is not a luxury for us. It is necessary for sustaining our callings as wives, mothers, friends, neighbors, and daughters of God.

One of the lies we often believe is that rest is selfish. We think, *If I stop, something important won't get done.* But rest is actually an act of faith. It declares that God is in control and that the world does not rest on our shoulders. When we pause, we are saying with our

*actions, Lord, I trust You to hold all things together, even while I stop for a moment.*

Think about the rhythms of creation. The sun rises and sets without our help. The tide rolls in and out without our planning. Plants grow in the soil even when we sleep. Built into creation itself is a rhythm of rest, a reminder that God provides. When we resist rest, we are resisting the design God built into the world for our good.

This summer, what would it look like to practice caring for your soul in small, intentional ways? Maybe it's giving yourself permission to nap when the afternoon heat slows everything down. Maybe it's carrying a journal outside in the morning to jot down prayers before the day begins. Maybe it's sitting by a window with a cup of tea, simply watching the sky change colors as evening falls. None of these things are wasted moments. They are holy pauses — places where God renews your strength and restores your perspective.

Psalm 23 tells us that the Shepherd guides us along right paths, bringing honor to His name. Our soul care isn't just about us — it's about living in a way that reflects God's presence. When we are rested, we are more patient with our children, more attentive to our spouses, more available to friends, more gentle with ourselves. Rest equips us to love better.

Mama, don't wait until you feel burned out to care for your soul. Don't let the long days of summer slip away without noticing the invitations to slow down. Rest is not wasted time; it is sacred time. It's in the stillness of the morning, the quiet of the evening, or the pause in the middle of the day that you may hear the Shepherd whisper, *Come. Let Me renew you.*

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This summer, may you find peace beside your own “green meadows and peaceful streams.” They may look like your porch swing, your backyard shade tree, or even the few quiet minutes after the children have gone to bed. Wherever you are, the Shepherd is ready to meet you and restore your soul.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. When you read Psalm 23:2–3, what image of rest comes to mind for you personally?
2. Do you find it difficult to give yourself permission to rest? Why or why not?
3. In what small, practical ways could you invite God’s presence into your summer days — even in the middle of noise and activity?
4. How does viewing rest as an *act of faith* change your perspective about slowing down?
5. Where might you create “green meadows” or “peaceful streams” in your daily rhythm this summer — simple spaces to pause and be renewed?

## Finding Rest in the Long Days

The morning light slipped in before I was ready, streaks of gold spilling across the floorboards. Even though the house was quiet, I felt the familiar tug of the to-do list waiting in my mind — laundry to fold, meals to plan, a garden that needed tending before the sun grew too strong. I pulled the covers up to my chin for just a moment longer, whispering a silent prayer: *Lord, help me to carry this day with peace, not hurry.*

By the time my feet touched the floor, the hum of summer was already alive. Outside, cicadas began their song, and through the screen I could hear the steady drip of dew falling from the trees. The kitchen greeted me with yesterday's dishes drying in the rack, a basket of produce on the counter, and the ever-present hum of the refrigerator. I filled the coffeepot and let the familiar gurgle anchor me.

It wasn't long before the shuffle of small feet echoed in the hallway. "Good morning, Mama," one of the younger ones mumbled, hair sticking up in every direction. He climbed onto the bench and leaned against the table. I poured cereal into a bowl and slid it in front of him, watching as his eyes brightened at the first spoonful.

Breakfast unfolded slowly. Some wanted toast, others begged for eggs, and one reached for leftover watermelon chunks from the fridge. I smiled at the mix — a true summer breakfast, simple and scattered. The table was noisy in the best kind of way: clinking spoons, sleepy jokes, plans for the day tumbling out faster than I could follow.

After chores were divided — one to sweep, one to fold towels, another to water the basil and tomatoes — we

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stepped outside together. The air was already warming, heavy with humidity, but the garden sparkled with drops of dew. The kids darted down the rows, squealing when a rabbit bounded toward the fence line. I knelt near the cucumbers, pulling weeds and brushing dirt from my hands, and thought how even here, in the middle of work, my soul felt steadier. The rhythm of hands in the soil always reminded me that God is near.

By midmorning, the heat pressed stronger, and I called the children back to the porch. "Water break!" I announced, handing out cups of lemonade that dripped with condensation. They collapsed onto the steps, sweaty and giggling, their bare feet swinging above the grass. I sat beside them, letting the sweat cool on my own forehead, and realized that in this pause — this simple break with sticky cups and laughter — I felt more rested than if I had chased productivity all morning.

After lunch, I declared what we all knew was coming: "Quiet hour." Groans filled the air, but they also scattered to their chosen corners. One curled up with a puzzle, another sprawled across the couch with a library book, while the youngest pulled out crayons. I poured myself iced tea and settled into the armchair with my journal.

For a few moments I simply sat. The fan hummed overhead, the house was unusually hushed, and outside, the cicadas droned on. I began jotting notes — not lists this time, but gratitude. Three small things: the rabbit in the garden, sticky lemonade smiles, and cool sheets waiting on the line. Naming them slowed my breathing, reminded me that rest begins in the soul long before the body catches up.

When my eyelids grew heavy, I let them. Ten minutes

of drifting sleep refreshed me more than another load of laundry ever could. And when I opened my eyes again, the house seemed lighter, calmer, as if the whole family had benefited from that single pause.

By late afternoon, the heat had softened just enough to coax us back outside. We pulled the grill from the garage and laid out hamburger patties, fresh ears of corn, and a bowl of sliced tomatoes. The children argued over who would flip the burgers, laughter bubbling as I shooed their eager hands from the spatula. Neighbors wandered over, drawn by the smell of smoke, and before long, the backyard was alive with chatter and squeals of children darting through sprinklers.

When the food was ready, we gathered around the picnic table. Plates filled quickly — burgers stacked high, corn dripping with butter, deviled eggs disappearing faster than I could refill the tray. Conversation spilled easily in the golden light, the kind of talk that only happens when the day has been full but not rushed.

As dusk settled, someone pulled out a guitar. A few voices joined in, ragged but warm, singing hymns that drifted upward with the smoke. Fireflies blinked in the grass, and children dashed with jars, trying to catch the light. I leaned back, watching the scene, and felt that deep sigh of contentment rise within me. This was soul care: not in an empty schedule, but in a heart that had learned to pause long enough to notice the goodness in front of me.

Over the weeks, these rhythms repeated: mornings in the garden, quiet afternoons with fans humming, evenings on the porch or in the yard. I began to notice

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how my own attitude shifted when I chose to pause rather than push. I was gentler with the children, slower to snap, quicker to laugh. The work of the home hadn't disappeared — there were still dishes to wash, socks to match, weeds to pull — but the heaviness had. Resting in God's presence made the ordinary work lighter.

I realized then that rest wasn't something to squeeze in after the day was done. It was something to weave through the hours, like golden threads tying the day together. And each pause, however small, was a declaration of faith: *Lord, I trust You to hold it all while I stop.*

One evening, as the sky blushed with sunset, my daughter curled beside me on the porch swing. She leaned her head against my shoulder and whispered, "I like it best when we don't hurry." I kissed her hair and nodded, silently thanking God for the reminder. Out of the mouths of children comes the wisdom we often forget.

By the time summer edged toward its close, I could look back and see the difference. It wasn't the grand adventures or the perfectly kept house that I remembered. It was the pauses: the slow meals outside, the sound of laughter mingled with sprinklers, the cool nap under a whirring fan. These small acts of rest became the anchor of our days.

And in them, I discovered that caring for the soul is less about escaping life and more about finding God in the middle of it — in the garden weeds, in the sticky lemonade hands, in the hush of quiet hour, in the glow of fireflies.

Summer had taught me that rest is not wasted. It is holy. It is where the Shepherd renews our strength, restores our perspective, and equips us to love better.

As the long days gave way to earlier sunsets, I closed my journal one evening with a single line written in bold: *Rest is an act of faith.*

And with that, I felt ready to carry the rhythm of soul care into every season that followed.

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## **Activities & Traditions**

The long days of summer can so easily fill up with noise and hurry, but caring for the soul often looks like building small pauses into the rhythm of home. These traditions don't require travel, money, or complicated planning. They are simple practices of rest — little reminders that God invites us to breathe, to notice, and to be renewed.

### **Porch Swing Pauses**

A porch swing, a rocking chair, or even a simple lawn chair can become holy ground when you sit long enough to let your heart settle. Make it a tradition to step outside in the morning or evening with a drink in hand, noticing the sounds around you — birds, crickets, or the breeze through the trees.

### **Afternoon "Quiet Hour"**

Declare one hour each day for slowing down. Books, puzzles, journaling, or even a short nap under a fan can become a family rhythm. It's less about silence and more about creating space for rest in the middle of busy days.

### **Journaling in the Garden**

Bring a notebook outside and jot down gratitude or prayers while sitting near the flowers or vegetables. Children can join with sketchbooks, drawing bugs or blossoms. It becomes a practice of noticing God's creation while slowing your spirit.

### **Hammock or Blanket Rest**

Hang a hammock under the trees or spread a blanket in the yard. Encourage everyone to take turns lying still, watching the clouds drift by. It may feel simple, but it teaches even little ones how to pause.

## **Sunset Watching**

Make it a habit to pause when the sky begins to change. Gather on the porch, sit in the yard, or even pull over while driving. Watching the sun slip below the horizon becomes a daily reminder that God is faithful to close each day with beauty.

## **Family Prayer Walks**

Evening walks can be more than exercise. Encourage children to point out things to thank God for — the flowers blooming, the neighbor's friendly wave, the stars beginning to shine. Turn the walk into a rhythm of noticing blessings together.

## **Summer Sabbath Moments**

Choose one day (or even just one evening) each week to do less — fewer chores, simple meals, no extra screens. Light a candle, eat outside, or linger at the table longer than usual. Call it "Soul Day" and let everyone remember that rest is a gift.

## **Water Break Rituals**

Instead of rushing through hydration on hot days, make it special. Fill pitchers with lemon slices, mint, or cucumber and sit together on the porch for a few minutes before scattering back to chores or play. Even these short pauses can refresh more than the body.

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## Comfort Foods for the Soul

When the days grow long and the sun stretches late into the evening, sometimes the best gift we can give ourselves is a meal that feels easy, refreshing, and nourishing. Caring for the soul can even be woven into what we eat — slowing down with a cool soup on the porch, sharing a light wrap after a hot afternoon, or ending the evening with a scoop of creamy gelato. These recipes are meant to be gentle on both body and spirit, reminding us that food is not only fuel but also a comfort God provides in every season.

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### Chilled Cucumber Soup

Cool, creamy, and refreshing — this soup is like air conditioning in a bowl. Perfect for hot afternoons when you don't feel like cooking.

#### Ingredients

- 4 large cucumbers, peeled and chopped
- 2 cups plain Greek yogurt
- 2 Tbsp fresh dill, chopped (or 1 tsp dried)
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 Tbsp lemon juice
- Salt and pepper, to taste

#### Directions

1. Blend cucumbers, yogurt, dill, garlic, and lemon juice until smooth.
2. Season with salt and pepper. Chill at least 2 hours before serving.
3. Serve cold, garnished with a sprig of dill or sliced cucumber.

*Cozy Note:* Serve with crusty bread or crackers for a soul-soothing light supper.

## **Avocado Toast with Tomato Slices**

Sometimes the simplest meals are the most satisfying. A thick slice of toast, creamy avocado, and a juicy garden tomato can feel like the taste of summer on a plate.

### **Ingredients**

- 2 slices hearty bread, toasted
- 1 ripe avocado
- 1 medium tomato, sliced
- Olive oil, for drizzling
- Salt and pepper, to taste

### **Directions**

1. Mash avocado with a fork and spread generously over warm toast.
2. Top with tomato slices, a drizzle of olive oil, and sprinkle with salt and pepper.
3. Serve immediately for breakfast, lunch, or a quick snack.

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## **Garden Veggie Wraps**

Perfect for a light lunch or dinner on the porch, these wraps are colorful, crunchy, and packed with fresh vegetables.

### **Ingredients**

- 4 large tortillas or wraps
- ½ cup hummus
- 1 cup spinach leaves
- 1 cup shredded carrots
- 1 cup sliced bell peppers
- 1 cucumber, thinly sliced

### **Directions**

1. Spread hummus evenly over each tortilla.
2. Layer spinach, carrots, peppers, and cucumbers.
3. Roll tightly and slice in half.

*Tip:* Wraps can be made ahead and stored in the fridge for quick grab-and-go meals.

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## **Egg Salad on Croissants**

Light, creamy egg salad tucked inside a buttery croissant feels like a little luxury — but it's simple enough for everyday summer lunches.

### **Ingredients**

- 6 hard-boiled eggs, chopped
- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup mayonnaise
- 1 tsp mustard
- 1 Tbsp fresh chives or green onion, chopped
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 4 croissants, split

### **Directions**

1. In a bowl, combine eggs, mayonnaise, mustard, chives, salt, and pepper.
2. Stir until creamy.
3. Spoon egg salad into croissants and serve.

## Ramen Noodle Salad with Candied Almonds

A crunchy, tangy salad that's been loved for generations. The candied almonds add the perfect sweet balance to the crisp cabbage and ramen noodles.

### Ingredients

- 1 bag coleslaw mix (or 6 cups shredded cabbage)
- 2 packs dry ramen noodles, crushed
- 1 cup sliced almonds
- 2 Tbsp sugar (for candying)
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- ¼ cup vinegar
- 2 Tbsp sugar
- 1 ramen seasoning packet
- ½ tsp chicken bouillon powder
- Salt and pepper, to taste

### Directions

1. Toast crushed ramen noodles lightly in a dry skillet until golden. Remove.
2. In the same skillet, heat almonds with 2 Tbsp sugar, stirring constantly until coated and golden. Spread onto parchment to cool.
3. In a jar, combine oil, vinegar, sugar, ramen seasoning, bouillon, salt, and pepper. Shake well.
4. Toss cabbage, ramen, and almonds. Pour dressing over just before serving.

*Note:* Best served fresh so the crunch stays crisp.

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## **Marinated Tomato & Onion Salad**

This is the kind of side dish you'll find at every church supper in the South — simple, tangy, and the perfect way to enjoy garden tomatoes.

### **Ingredients**

- 4 large ripe tomatoes, sliced
- 1 small red onion, thinly sliced
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 3 Tbsp red wine vinegar
- 1 tsp sugar
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 2 Tbsp fresh basil or parsley, chopped

### **Directions**

1. Arrange tomatoes and onions in a shallow dish.
2. Whisk together oil, vinegar, sugar, salt, and pepper. Pour over vegetables.
3. Sprinkle with herbs and marinate 30 minutes before serving.

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## **Herbed Cottage Cheese Bowls**

This makes the easiest light lunch or snack — high in protein, refreshing, and customizable.

### **Ingredients**

- 1 cup cottage cheese
- ½ cup cherry tomatoes, halved
- ½ cucumber, diced
- 1 Tbsp fresh chives or dill, chopped
- Salt and pepper, to taste

### **Directions**

1. Spoon cottage cheese into a bowl.
2. Top with tomatoes, cucumber, herbs, salt, and pepper.
3. Stir lightly and enjoy with crackers or fresh bread.

## Simple Cheese & Crackers with Fresh Fruit

Sometimes soul care means not cooking at all. This simple board can be shared for lunch, a light dinner, or even a bedtime snack.

### Ingredients

- Assorted cheeses (cheddar, mozzarella, gouda, or whatever's on hand)
- Crackers or sliced baguette
- Fresh fruit: grapes, apple slices, melon cubes, or berries

### Directions

1. Arrange cheese, crackers, and fruit on a platter.
  2. Serve chilled or room temperature.
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## Pineapple Coconut Gelato

Tropical and creamy, this homemade gelato feels like vacation in a bowl.

### Ingredients

- 2 cups pineapple chunks
- 1 cup coconut milk
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

### Directions

1. Puree pineapple until smooth. Add coconut milk, sugar, vanilla, and salt. Blend well.
  2. Chill mixture for 2 hours.
  3. Churn in an ice cream maker until creamy. Freeze 4 hours to set.
  4. For no-churn: freeze in a shallow dish, stirring with a fork every 30 minutes until creamy.
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## **Homemade Sorbet**

Bright, sweet, and refreshing — sorbet is lighter than ice cream but still a perfect summer treat.

### **Ingredients**

- 4 cups fruit (peach, raspberry, or mango work well)
- ½ cup sugar
- ½ cup water
- 1 Tbsp lemon juice

### **Directions**

1. In a saucepan, combine sugar and water. Heat until dissolved, then cool.
2. Blend fruit with lemon juice until smooth. Stir in cooled syrup.
3. Chill, then churn in an ice cream maker. Freeze until firm.

## Closing Thoughts

As the days of summer stretch long, it's easy to feel pulled in every direction. Meals to prepare, projects to finish, children to guide, friends to see — the hours fill before we've even had a chance to catch our breath. Yet God, in His kindness, gives us these holy invitations to pause. A quiet hour in the afternoon. A simple meal shared at the table. A glass of iced tea sipped slowly on the porch. Even a bowl of cool soup or a scoop of gelato can remind us that rest is a gift.

Caring for our souls doesn't always require grand retreats or elaborate plans. Sometimes it is found in the small choices — choosing to eat light and linger at the table, letting the house be quiet for just a while, or saying yes to rest when the world tells us to keep going.

Remember, the Shepherd is the One who leads us beside still waters. He does not demand our striving; He invites us to lay it down. When we follow His lead into rest, we discover that our strength is renewed, our perspective is lifted, and our hearts are softened toward those around us.

So this summer, let the long days be marked not by hurry but by peace. Let your meals be simple, your evenings unhurried, and your soul refreshed in His presence. Rest is not wasted — it is sacred. And in those quiet moments, you may just hear Him whisper, *"Come, let Me renew you."*

## Reflection Questions

1. When you picture the Shepherd leading you beside "green meadows and peaceful streams," what does that look like in your own summer life?
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2. Do you struggle with giving yourself permission to rest? What thoughts or fears keep you from slowing down?
3. What simple rhythms of rest could you weave into your days this summer — things like porch-sitting, quiet hour, journaling, or sunset watching?
4. How do meals and food traditions influence the atmosphere of your home? In what ways can lighter, simpler foods help create space for peace?
5. Think back to the story of quiet moments — the porch swing, the lemonade break, the evening fireflies. Which of those images speaks most to your heart, and how could you recreate something similar for your own family?
6. Rest is not wasted time; it is an act of faith. How might remembering that truth change the way you approach the long days ahead?

## Chapter 8 — Keeping Joy Alive: Making Memories That Last

### **Scripture (NLT)**

*"This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it." — Psalm 118:24*

### **Devotional Reflection**

Every season of life carries its own opportunities for joy, but summer has a way of magnifying them. The days are longer, the evenings softer, and the air feels alive with possibility. Children ride bikes until the streetlights glow, neighbors linger a little longer by the fence, and family meals stretch late into the night because no one wants to hurry indoors. These are the moments that shape us — the ones that become cherished memories when the years have flown by.

Yet joy is not something that automatically happens just because the sun shines brighter or the days stretch longer. Joy is something we are called to choose, to nurture, and to keep alive. Psalm 118:24 reminds us plainly: *"This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it."* Notice the wording. It does not say, *"This is the perfect day... if everything goes right, then we'll rejoice."* No, it declares simply: *"This is the day."* Whatever it holds, whatever interruptions or imperfections it brings, we can still rejoice.

True joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness often depends on things going smoothly: a successful outing, children behaving just so, or the meal turning out exactly as planned. But joy runs deeper. Joy is rooted in the unchanging presence of God. It flows from the truth that He is with us in both the laughter-filled evenings and the tear-streaked ones. Happiness may come and go, but joy endures.

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This matters because the long days of summer can just as easily wear us out as they can fill us up. The noise of children at home all day, the messes that multiply faster than we can clean them, the heat that leaves everyone irritable — these realities can snuff out our joy if we're not intentional. Keeping joy alive requires a steady heart, anchored in the Lord. It means choosing to see His goodness even when the day feels ordinary or even difficult.

One of the greatest gifts we can give to those around us is an atmosphere of joy. Think about it: our children may not remember every meal we cooked or every chore we insisted on, but they will remember the sound of laughter at the dinner table. They will remember bedtime stories told with warmth, the silly games in the yard, the way their mom or dad found delight in the simplest things. Joy leaves a mark that lasts longer than almost anything else we give.

And here's the beautiful thing: joy doesn't have to be tied to grand events. Vacations and special trips are wonderful, but the memories that often stick the longest are the small, repeated ones. The Saturday morning pancakes with extra syrup. The evenings catching fireflies in the yard. The tradition of stopping for ice cream after church on Sunday. These little joys weave together into a fabric of memory that children — and we ourselves — carry for life.

Joy also comes in learning to laugh at the unexpected. The spilled lemonade, the picnic interrupted by a sudden downpour, the board game where everyone got a little too competitive — these are the things we sometimes want to forget in the moment, but years later they are the very stories we retell with laughter. When we keep joy alive, even in interruptions, we turn potential frustrations into treasured memories.

Of course, there are seasons when joy feels harder to find. Maybe life feels heavy, grief lingers, or disappointment overshadows the summer days. Even then, the Lord offers us His joy as strength (Nehemiah 8:10). Joy does not deny the hard things; it sustains us through them. It whispers hope in the middle of sorrow and reminds us that God's goodness is not gone simply because life is difficult. Keeping joy alive may look quieter in those times — perhaps it's holding onto a verse, noticing a sunset, or cherishing one small smile. But even then, joy is still possible because it comes from Him, not our circumstances.

As we enter into summer's long stretch, let's take intentional steps to keep joy alive. Let's slow down enough to notice the gifts tucked into our days. Let's choose to laugh more than we sigh, to linger instead of rush, to celebrate the small moments that are shaping our families and friendships. Let's create an atmosphere where joy is not the exception, but the rhythm.

Because here's the truth: the memories we want to last are not just made of what we do, but of how we live while doing them. If our homes are filled with joy — joy that rests in the Lord, joy that spills into laughter and gratitude — then we are building a legacy that will last for generations.

So today, let us take Psalm 118:24 as a personal invitation. *This is the day the Lord has made. Rejoice in it. Be glad in it. Keep joy alive.* For the joy we nurture now will echo in the hearts of those who walk beside us, becoming the stories and memories they carry for the rest of their lives.

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## Reflection Questions

1. When you look back on your life, which memories of joy stand out the most? Were they big, planned moments or small, ordinary ones?
2. What is the difference between fleeting happiness and lasting joy? How have you experienced both in your own life?
3. What simple family rhythms or traditions could you begin (or continue) this summer to nurture joy in your home?
4. How can you respond with joy when plans are interrupted or things don't go as expected?
5. How might keeping joy alive in your home today impact the memories your children or loved ones will carry into the future?

## **Making Memories That Last**

The cicadas had already started their steady hum by the time I poured my second cup of coffee. The kitchen window was open just enough to let in the thick summer air, carrying with it the mingled scents of freshly cut grass and warm pavement. It was going to be another hot day, I could tell.

I stood for a moment at the counter, coffee in hand, looking around at the simple scene that was my life. Cereal bowls from breakfast were stacked by the sink. Flip-flops were scattered by the door, their rubber soles leaving faint marks on the tile. A leaning tower of library books sat at the edge of the table, threatening to collapse if anyone brushed too close. Ordinary. Messy. But in its own way, beautiful.

“This is the day the Lord has made,” I whispered under my breath, Psalm 118:24 carrying me into another long summer day. “I will rejoice and be glad in it.”

Choosing joy felt like a decision I had to make every single day in the summer. With children home from sunup to sundown, the hours stretched wide and sometimes heavy. There was always someone hungry, always a new trail of crumbs, always a disagreement to settle. The laundry baskets never stayed empty, and the fridge door seemed to open every five minutes. But there was also laughter — barefoot afternoons in the yard, watermelon juice dripping down chins, golden hours when the world felt slowed down and holy.

I have learned that joy doesn't arrive wrapped in perfection. It comes in the middle of the ordinary, when I stop long enough to notice God's goodness in the exact moment I've been given.

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After breakfast, we carried our summer rhythm onto the front porch. The sun was already strong, but the shade made it bearable, with the faintest breeze stirring the air. I spread a quilt across the boards, and the children followed with books tucked under their arms.

Someone plopped down cross-legged with a pencil and notebook, another sprawled on her stomach with a stack of picture books, while the littlest wriggled to sit as close to me as possible.

We began with our devotional, as we always tried to do. It wasn't picture-perfect — it rarely was — but it was ours. I read aloud from Psalms while the younger ones fidgeted, and then we shared our "thankfuls." "I'm thankful for popsicles," one child blurted out immediately.

"I'm thankful for swimming," another added.

The littlest piped up, "I'm thankful for bunnies!" remembering the rabbit we had spotted darting across the yard earlier that week.

I wrote each one down in my notebook, a growing record of simple gifts that might otherwise slip away unnoticed.

As we talked about what it meant to rejoice in the day God had made, I reminded them of the rainy picnic we'd had the week before — how the storm had ruined our plans but ended up giving us one of our favorite memories of the summer. "See?" I told them, smiling.

"Joy doesn't have to wait for perfect weather." They grinned, nodding, already begging to try another "rain picnic" sometime soon.

The lesson wasn't polished, and the littlest interrupted more than once, but we ended with laughter. And that was enough.

By midmorning, the sun had grown fierce, and I sent the older ones outside with a list of chores before the heat became unbearable. One dragged the hose across the yard to water the garden, another collected eggs from the chicken coop, while the youngest squealed with delight as she tried to catch butterflies near the fence.

Inside, I started a loaf of bread in the machine, the scent of yeast filling the air. The baby tugged at my skirt, so I scooped him up, balancing him on my hip while stirring a pot of macaroni for lunch. It was hot, and I could feel sweat trickle down my back, but there was something satisfying about the rhythm of it all — the clatter of dishes, the thump of feet on the porch, the slam of the screen door as someone darted in for a drink.

We gathered at the table, bowls of macaroni and slices of garden tomatoes spread before us. Conversation bounced from plans for the afternoon to silly jokes that had everyone laughing so hard milk nearly came out of someone's nose. It was loud, a little chaotic, but as I looked around at the flushed cheeks and bright eyes, I thought: *this is what joy looks like in real life.*

After lunch, I declared "quiet hour." Groans filled the air, but they knew the drill. One child curled up with a library book, another set up a puzzle at the corner table, while the youngest lined up toy animals on the rug. The baby finally drifted off for his nap, and the house grew still in a way that felt rare and precious.

I sank into the armchair with my coffee reheated,

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journal in my lap. I scribbled a few lines — not long, just enough to anchor the day: the butterfly chase, the silly joke at lunch, the bread rising on the counter.

Small things, maybe, but holy in their own way. As I wrote, I felt that deep sigh rise inside me, the one that comes when your soul remembers its anchor. Rest wasn't about escaping my life — it was about finding God in the middle of it. And in that quiet hour, joy slipped in like sunlight through a window.

When the baby woke and the sun dipped lower, we carried our supper outside. Burgers sizzled on the grill, corn on the cob steamed, and watermelon waited on the table. Neighbors wandered over, drawn by the smell and the sound of children squealing through the sprinkler. Before long, the backyard was alive with laughter and the kind of chatter that only happens when the day has been long but good.

We ate until the plates were empty and the watermelon rinds piled high. Someone pulled out a guitar, and soon voices rose together — off-key, perhaps, but wholehearted. The sky blushed pink and gold, fireflies blinked across the yard, and the children chased them with jars, giggling in the twilight.

At one point, I leaned back in my chair, letting the hum of conversation and laughter wash over me. The air was still warm, my hair stuck to my forehead, and the dishes were waiting inside. But I felt that steady whisper in my soul: *this is joy. This is the day the Lord has made. And I will rejoice in it.*

By the time we herded everyone inside, cheeks were flushed, feet dirty, and clothes damp from sprinkler water. Baths were quick, pajamas wrinkled, and hair still damp when we gathered in the living room.

“Can we read a story?” someone asked, eyes wide. I hesitated — the house was a wreck, the clock already late. But I remembered again: joy is found in the yes.

So we curled together on the couch, the baby nestled in my lap, and I opened a book. Giggles filled the room at the funny voices, little heads leaned heavy against my shoulder, and as I turned the last page, I realized this moment mattered far more than folded laundry or spotless counters ever could.

When I kissed them goodnight, I lingered a little longer, whispering prayers over each one. My body was tired, but my heart was full.

As I finally set my coffee mug in the sink, long since empty, I thought back over the day. It hadn't been flawless — far from it. There had been spills, bickering, and more interruptions than I could count. But it had been full of joy, not because everything went right, but because we chose to rejoice anyway.

And that, I realized, is the legacy I want to leave. Not spotless houses or perfectly executed plans, but a trail of memories stitched together with laughter and joy. Memories that will one day remind my children, “Our home was full of love. Our home was full of joy.” Because joy is not fragile. It bends and weaves into the ordinary. It shows up in lemonade stands, rainy picnics, puzzles at quiet hour, watermelon rinds stacked high, and bedtime stories told through yawns. Joy is not about perfection — it's about presence.

And presence, I am learning, is what makes memories last.

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As I laid my head on the pillow that night, the words of Psalm 118:24 circled once again in my heart: "*This is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.*" Not because the day had been perfect, but because it had been real. In the spills and the laughter, in the quiet hours and the noisy ones, joy had been present — alive, steady, and growing roots. That is how memories are made, not through flawless plans but through hearts that choose to rejoice in the ordinary days. And that is how we keep joy alive — by welcoming it into every corner of our home and letting it become part of our story.

## **Activities & Traditions**

Joy doesn't just appear on its own — often, it grows out of the little rhythms and traditions we nurture in our homes. These don't need to be elaborate or expensive. Some of the best memories are made from the simplest things. Here are a few ideas for keeping joy alive during the long summer days:

### **Start a Thankful Journal Together**

Keep a notebook in the kitchen or living room where everyone writes (or dictates) something they're thankful for each day. By summer's end, you'll have a treasure trove of blessings to look back on.

### **Rainy Day Picnics**

Instead of groaning when a storm interrupts plans, spread a blanket in the living room or head outside under the porch and embrace the moment. Sandwiches and laughter taste better when enjoyed in the unexpected.

### **Lemonade or Bake Stand**

Encourage your children to set up a lemonade stand, bake cookies, or share garden vegetables with neighbors. It's about more than the coins they earn — it's about learning the joy of hospitality and connection.

### **Sunset Walks or Drives**

Make it a tradition to pause at dusk. Walk around the block, drive to a favorite overlook, or simply sit in the yard and watch the sky change colors. The pause itself becomes the memory.

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## **Backyard Campouts**

Pitch a tent, roast marshmallows, and tell stories under the stars. Even if you only last until 10 p.m. before retreating indoors, the adventure will be remembered for years.

## **Family Game Nights**

Pull out board games, cards, or even make up your own silly contests. Keep popcorn handy, expect a little chaos, and embrace the laughter when things don't go as planned.

## **Firefly Chasing**

Hand out jars (with holes poked in the lids) and let children chase glowing sparks across the yard. Release them after a few minutes and watch the joy flicker in your kids' eyes as much as in the night sky.

## **Kitchen Helpers**

Invite children to help with summer meals — snapping green beans, slicing fruit, or stirring cookie dough. Messes may multiply, but so will the memories.

## **Sunday Sundaes**

Choose one evening a week to build ice cream sundaes at home. Lay out toppings, let everyone pile them high, and enjoy a tradition that mixes sweetness with togetherness.

## **Joy Jar**

Keep a large jar on the counter labeled "*Summer Joys.*" Each time someone laughs hard, learns something new, or notices a blessing, jot it on a slip of paper and drop it in. On the last day of summer, read them all aloud as a family celebration.

## **Comfort Foods**

### **Walking Tacos**

Sometimes joy is as simple as dinner served in a bag of chips. Walking tacos are one of those fun summer meals that children talk about long after the season ends. They're easy, customizable, and perfect for nights when you want less cleanup and more laughter.

### **Ingredients**

- Small bags of corn chips (like Fritos or Doritos)
- 1 lb ground beef or turkey
- 1 packet taco seasoning
- Taco toppings: shredded lettuce, diced tomatoes, shredded cheese, sour cream, salsa, jalapeños

### **Directions**

1. Brown the meat in a skillet and stir in taco seasoning.
  2. Hand out unopened chip bags to each person. Carefully cut the bag open along the side.
  3. Spoon the taco meat directly into each bag, then add toppings of choice.
  4. Grab a fork, give it a shake, and enjoy straight from the bag.
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## **Root Beer Floats**

Few things taste more like childhood joy than an ice-cold root beer float on a hot summer evening. The fizz of soda hitting vanilla ice cream always makes kids' eyes light up. You can switch it up with orange soda for a "creamsicle" version or cola for a classic twist.

### **Ingredients**

- Vanilla ice cream
- Root beer (or orange soda, or cola)

### **Directions**

1. Place two scoops of vanilla ice cream in a tall glass.
2. Slowly pour root beer over the top until the glass foams.
3. Add a straw and a long spoon. Sip, slurp, and smile.

## Homemade Funnel Cakes

Bring the county fair to your own kitchen. The smell of hot, sweet dough and the dusting of powdered sugar is guaranteed to stir up joy — and probably a few sticky fingers too.

### Ingredients

- 2 cups flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp salt
- 2 eggs
- 1 ½ cups milk
- 1 Tbsp sugar
- Oil for frying
- Powdered sugar, for topping

### Directions

1. Heat oil in a deep skillet or pot to 375°F.
  2. In a bowl, whisk together eggs, milk, and sugar. Add flour, baking powder, and salt until smooth.
  3. Pour batter into a squeeze bottle or funnel. Drizzle batter into the hot oil in swirly circles.
  4. Fry until golden brown, about 2 minutes per side. Drain on paper towels.
  5. Dust generously with powdered sugar before serving warm.
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## Mini Corn Dogs

Corn dogs are a state fair classic, but making mini versions at home makes them fun, shareable, and just right for kids' hands.

### Ingredients

- 1 package hot dogs, cut into thirds
- 1 cup cornmeal
- 1 cup flour
- 1 Tbsp sugar
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 1 egg
- 1 cup milk
- Oil for frying

### Directions

1. Pat hot dog pieces dry and insert toothpicks or small skewers.
2. Whisk together cornmeal, flour, sugar, baking powder, egg, and milk until smooth.
3. Dip each hot dog piece into the batter, coating well.
4. Fry in hot oil (350°F) until golden, about 2 minutes. Drain on paper towels.
5. Serve with ketchup and mustard for dipping.

## **Fruit Pizza**

This is the dessert that gets “oohs” and “ahhs” every time it shows up at a summer gathering. A sugar cookie crust topped with sweet cream cheese frosting and bright summer fruit becomes a piece of edible art — and a memory maker.

### **Ingredients**

- 1 roll sugar cookie dough (or homemade)
- 1 package cream cheese, softened
- ½ cup powdered sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- Assorted fruit: strawberries, blueberries, kiwi, grapes, peaches

### **Directions**

1. Press sugar cookie dough into a pizza pan. Bake at 350°F until golden, about 10–12 minutes. Cool completely.
  2. Beat cream cheese with powdered sugar and vanilla until smooth. Spread over cooled crust.
  3. Arrange fruit on top in colorful patterns. Slice into wedges and serve.
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## **Soft Pretzels with Cheese Dip**

There's something about warm, chewy pretzels that makes people instantly happy. Add a little cheese dip and you've got a snack that feels like a treat and tastes like joy.

### **Ingredients**

- 2 ¼ tsp yeast (1 packet)
- 1 ½ cups warm water
- 1 Tbsp sugar
- 4 cups flour
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 egg, beaten (for brushing)
- Coarse salt for sprinkling
- Cheese dip (store-bought or homemade)

### **Directions**

1. Dissolve yeast and sugar in warm water. Stir in flour and salt to make a dough. Knead until smooth. Let rise 1 hour.
  2. Divide into pieces, roll into ropes, and shape into pretzels.
  3. Brush with beaten egg and sprinkle with coarse salt.
  4. Bake at 425°F for 12–15 minutes until golden. Serve warm with cheese dip.
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## **Homemade Snow Cones**

A snow cone stand is fun, but making them at home is just as joyful. Kids love choosing their own syrup flavors and watching the ice mound in the cup like fresh snow.

### **Ingredients**

- Crushed or shaved ice (blend ice cubes until fine)
- Flavored syrups (store-bought or homemade)

### **Directions**

1. Scoop shaved ice into cups.
  2. Pour syrup generously over the top.
  3. Hand out spoons and napkins — and be ready for colorful smiles.
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## **Chocolate-Dipped Frozen Bananas**

This is one of those simple treats that feels fancy but takes just minutes to make. Kids love decorating them with sprinkles, nuts, or coconut.

### **Ingredients**

- Bananas, cut in half
- Popsicle sticks
- 1 cup chocolate chips
- 1 Tbsp coconut oil
- Toppings: sprinkles, chopped nuts, shredded coconut

### **Directions**

1. Insert sticks into banana halves. Freeze for 1–2 hours.
  2. Melt chocolate with coconut oil until smooth.
  3. Dip bananas into chocolate, then roll in toppings.
  4. Place on a parchment-lined tray and freeze until firm.
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## Caramel Popcorn

Sticky, sweet, and crunchy — caramel popcorn is a family favorite for summer movie nights or backyard gatherings.

### Ingredients

- 10 cups popped popcorn
- 1 cup brown sugar
- ½ cup butter
- ¼ cup corn syrup
- ½ tsp baking soda
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 250°F. Place popcorn in a large roasting pan.
  2. In a saucepan, melt butter, brown sugar, and corn syrup. Boil for 5 minutes, stirring constantly.
  3. Remove from heat and stir in baking soda and vanilla. Pour over popcorn and toss well.
  4. Bake 1 hour, stirring every 15 minutes. Cool before serving.
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## Cotton Candy Grapes

Sometimes joy comes in the simplest form — like a bowl of grapes that taste just like cotton candy. They're one of those little summer surprises that make everyone stop and say, *"Wait...how is this real?"* No recipe required here — just wash, chill, and serve.

For an extra treat, pop them in the freezer for a couple of hours. They turn into bite-sized frozen candies that are perfect for hot afternoons. Kids love them, and truthfully, adults do too. It's proof that God tucks sweetness into unexpected places.

## Closing Thoughts

When I look back on my favorite summers, I don't remember everything going smoothly. What I remember are the small joys that showed up in the middle of ordinary days — sticky fingers from funnel cakes, the fizz of root beer floats, laughter spilling out during game night, and bowls of Cotton Candy Grapes passed around while the cicadas sang.

Joy is rarely neat. It's often a little messy, a little noisy, sometimes even a little unexpected. But it's those very moments — the popcorn that stuck to the floor, the ice cream that dripped down little hands, the laughter that shook the walls — that become the memories our families carry with them.

Keeping joy alive doesn't mean chasing big events. It means choosing to delight in what's already here: the long summer evenings, the giggles over silly foods, the chance to pause and say, *this moment matters*. And when we do, we aren't just filling days — we're weaving a legacy of joy that will echo for years to come.

So don't overlook the small things. Let the treats be sticky, let the laughter be loud, let the memories pile up like watermelon rinds and popsicle sticks. Joy is found in the choosing. And joy — once chosen — is what keeps our homes warm with love and alive with memories that last.

## Reflection Questions

1. When you look back on your own childhood summers, what simple foods or traditions bring back the strongest memories of joy?
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2. How do you see the difference between short bursts of happiness and deeper joy that lingers long after the moment has passed?
3. Which of these activities or comfort foods could you add to your family's rhythm this summer to create lasting, joy-filled memories?
4. How might saying "yes" to small, messy joys (like root beer floats or backyard campouts) shift the atmosphere in your home?
5. Joy can be contagious. How can you intentionally model choosing joy for your children — so that it becomes part of their memory and their faith story?

## Chapter 9 — Gratitude in the Glow: Thankfulness for the Season

### *Scripture (NLT)*

*"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever." — Psalm 107:1*

### Devotional Reflection

There is a glow to late summer that feels different from any other time of year. The days are still warm and long, but something in the air shifts ever so slightly.

The evenings arrive just a little sooner, the cicadas hum a little louder, and the sunsets paint the sky in deeper shades of orange and pink. You can sense the season leaning toward change, even while summer still lingers.

In that glow, gratitude often rises more easily to the surface. Perhaps it's the way the slower rhythm of summer lets us pause a little longer. Perhaps it's simply that when we look back on all the small moments — the sticky popsicle hands, the backyard laughter, the meals eaten outdoors, the porch conversations that stretched into the night — we realize how many gifts God has given us, gifts we might have overlooked in the rush of everyday life.

Psalm 107:1 tells us: *"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever."* Gratitude doesn't hinge on whether every day turned out as we hoped. Gratitude isn't reserved for when the children were well-behaved, the house stayed clean, or the calendar stayed manageable. Gratitude flows from something deeper, something steadier — the goodness of God and His enduring, faithful love.

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It is easy to look back on a summer and remember the things that didn't go the way we planned — the vacation that was cut short by illness, the picnic rained out, the days when tempers were short and patience thinner than we'd like to admit. But gratitude asks us to shift our focus. Instead of magnifying the frustrations, it gently turns our eyes to notice the blessings that were still present all along. Maybe the rained-out picnic became a blanket spread across the living room floor.

Maybe the shortened vacation turned into more family evenings at home. Maybe the messy, loud days reminded us of the precious gift of life lived together. Gratitude helps us see God's fingerprints in places we might otherwise have overlooked.

Gratitude is more than a passing feeling — it is a practice. It is something we choose, day by day, often moment by moment. Some mornings, gratitude flows naturally, spilling out like the sunlight through the window. Other mornings, it requires intention. It means whispering a prayer of thanks before our feet hit the floor, even when the laundry piles are waiting and the to-do list is already full. It means choosing to see interruptions not only as frustrations, but as opportunities for patience and presence.

And here is the beauty of it: gratitude, once chosen, has a way of transforming the atmosphere. When we give thanks, peace slips into our hearts. Worry loosens its grip. Perspective returns. Gratitude turns the ordinary into something sacred. A messy kitchen becomes evidence of a meal shared. A noisy house becomes a reminder that little feet still run down the hallway. A long summer day, heavy with heat, becomes an invitation to slow down and rest.

I've often noticed that children teach us gratitude in the simplest ways. A child will exclaim over fireflies in a jar, or the thrill of the first bite of watermelon, or the joy of running through the sprinkler on a sweltering day. They are not waiting for the perfect moment — they are simply delighting in what is in front of them. And in their joy, they invite us to see through their eyes. Gratitude doesn't have to be complicated. Sometimes it looks like simply saying, "Thank You, Lord, for this exact moment," even if it's not what we would have scripted.

As summer bends toward its close, gratitude becomes a way to hold on to the glow of the season. We look back, we give thanks, and we realize that none of it was wasted. The slow mornings, the loud afternoons, the golden evenings — they were all gifts from a God whose love never fails. Gratitude is what turns those fleeting days into lasting memories. It anchors us in His goodness and reminds us that He has been faithful, not only this summer but in every season.

Maybe this summer wasn't perfect. Maybe there were hard days, tears shed, or disappointments faced. Even so, God's love endured. And in that enduring love, there are still reasons to give thanks. Gratitude doesn't deny the hard — it holds it together with the good, acknowledging that both exist but choosing to magnify the gifts.

So let us not let this season slip away unnoticed. Before the school schedules pick back up, before the crispness of fall sweeps in, let's pause in the glow of summer and give thanks. Write down the moments. Say them aloud.

Gather your family around the table and name the blessings together. Gratitude doesn't just fill journals —

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it fills hearts. And as we practice it, we find our perspective shifting. We realize that joy is multiplied when we give thanks, and peace is deepened when we remember His goodness.

The truth is, gratitude isn't meant for one season alone. But summer's glow gives us a chance to practice it more intentionally. To remember that God is good. To see that His faithful love is still carrying us. And to let those truths sink into our bones so that when the seasons shift — as they always do — our hearts are already trained to give thanks.

So today, as the sun sets in brilliant colors and the cicadas sing their evening song, pause for just a moment. Breathe deep. Remember the words of Psalm 107:1: "*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever.*" And then whisper your gratitude back to Him. For the glow, for the season, for the ordinary gifts that have become extraordinary simply because they are seen.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. When you think back over this summer, what small, ordinary moments stand out as gifts from God?
2. How does choosing gratitude change the way you view interruptions, messes, or plans that didn't go the way you hoped?
3. In what ways could you begin (or continue) a daily gratitude practice — such as journaling, prayer, or family thank-you lists?

4. How can you involve your children or loved ones in expressing gratitude, so it becomes part of your home's rhythm?
  
  5. Gratitude often helps us notice God's presence more clearly. Where have you felt His faithful love in this season, even in unexpected places?
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## Thankfulness for the Season

The late summer sun slipped through the curtains, softer now than in June but still bright enough to wake the room with a warm invitation. I stirred before the alarm, stretching under the light quilt. The hum of cicadas drifted faintly through the open window, their song a steady reminder of the season's fullness.

I rose quietly and padded into the kitchen, careful not to wake the others just yet. The floor was cool underfoot, and the familiar rhythm of starting the coffeepot brought comfort. Soon the rich aroma filled the air. Mug in hand, I opened the back door and stepped onto the porch.

The yard carried its own kind of glow at this time of year. The grass, a little dry from weeks without rain, shimmered with dew. Sunflowers at the garden's edge bowed their heavy heads, and the tomatoes hung ripe and red, waiting for harvest. A swallow darted low across the yard, chasing invisible insects in the morning light.

I settled into my chair, hands wrapped around my coffee, and whispered a simple prayer: "Thank You, Lord, for this day."

It didn't take long before the stillness broke. A door creaked, and soon one of the girls joined me, still wrapped in her blanket. She tucked her knees under her chin, her hair tangled from sleep.

"I woke up and smelled coffee," she said with a sleepy grin.

I laughed softly. "Well, you're always welcome to sit with me. Want to see how the garden looks this

morning?”

She nodded, and together we walked barefoot through the damp grass. She pointed out the basil that had grown bushy overnight and a cluster of cherry tomatoes she claimed as hers. We picked a handful to bring inside, their skins splitting with ripeness. As she bit into one, juice ran down her chin. She giggled and said, “That’s the best one yet.” Gratitude, I thought, often looks like simple delight.

By the time we returned, the house had woken fully. The kitchen filled with chatter, the clink of cereal bowls, and the scrape of chairs across the floor. Some wanted toast, others begged for scrambled eggs.

“Can we have pancakes?” one of the boys asked hopefully, already digging in the pantry.

“Not today,” I said, cracking eggs into a skillet. “We’ll save that for Saturday.”

Another piped up, “The neighbor’s dog got out again! I saw him running down the street.”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t get into our garden,” I replied, flipping the eggs while toast popped behind me.

Questions about the day tumbled over one another: “Can we ride bikes?” “Can we invite the neighbors?”

“Can we swim later?” I answered each as best I could with a smile, trying not to burn the eggs.

Breakfast ended in the usual whirlwind. Together we rinsed dishes, wiped crumbs, and swept the floor. Even in the noise, I found myself whispering thanks — for the gift of hands that help, for chatter that fills the house, for the glow of summer light spilling across the table.

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By midmorning, the sun blazed high. We carried baskets of laundry outside, the sheets and towels flapping in the breeze as we pinned them to the line.

The children turned it into a race — who could hang their pile the fastest without dropping clothespins. One child held a pillowcase high like a flag, shouting, “Victory!” while another chased after a towel that had flown loose and landed in the grass. Laughter spilled across the yard, and before long the hose was pulled from its coil.

“Accidentally” a spray of water cooled everyone down.

Squeals rang out as damp footprints dotted the porch. I shook my head, pretending to scold, but my heart was light. Gratitude swelled again: for the gift of children’s laughter echoing in the summer air, for a yard filled with life.

We gathered the last of the laundry and spread it evenly, the white sheets glowing bright against the blue sky. Standing back, I breathed in the mingled scent of sun, grass, and soap. Simple chores, rooted in the rhythm of home, felt like holy work.

When the chores were finished, we packed a simple lunch: peanut butter sandwiches, apple slices, and a jar of pickles. The children carried a quilt out to the shade tree, spreading it wide while I balanced a basket of food.

Cicadas droned overhead, their steady hum a backdrop to the meal. The children leaned back on their elbows, pointing at clouds that shifted into dragons, castles, and sheep. The dog padded over, tongue lolling, hoping for a crust of bread.

"Best picnic ever," one declared, just as they had said the last time. The others quickly agreed, even as juice boxes dripped and napkins fluttered away in the breeze. "Seed-spitting contest!" a boy shouted after biting into a slice of watermelon.

"Oh no you don't," I laughed, remembering last summer's mess. "Not near the house — out toward the fence if you must!"

They lined up anyway, aiming with exaggerated seriousness. Seeds arched through the air, laughter erupting whether they landed far or barely rolled. I sat back, smiling at the sight. Gratitude rose again. Even something as ordinary as lunch could turn into a memory when shared with thankfulness.

By afternoon, the heat pressed heavy. "Quiet hour," I announced, earning the usual chorus of groans. Still, books, puzzles, and sketchpads soon appeared in cozy corners.

I poured a tall glass of iced tea, set my journal on my lap, and let the fan stir the thick air. On the page I began a list:

- Morning coffee on the porch
- A tomato bursting with sweetness
- Sheets flapping white against a blue sky
- Children laughing over a picnic quilt
- The hum of cicadas, faithful as a clock

Before long, footsteps padded over. One child peeked at my writing. "What are you doing, Mama?" "Writing what I'm thankful for," I said. "Want to try?"

She thought for a moment, then wrote carefully under my list: "Watermelon, the dog, playing in the hose,

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and... naps." We both laughed. Gratitude passed from my hand to hers, and I silently thanked God for the chance to teach thankfulness in these small ways. The house fell quiet. A few children drifted to sleep, pencils still in hand. I closed my eyes for a few minutes too, lulled by the steady hum of cicadas outside. Gratitude had a way of turning stillness into rest.

When the house woke again, the day had tilted toward evening. Shadows stretched across the yard, and a golden light spilled through the windows.

"Cookout tonight," I suggested, and cheers rang out.

Together we pulled the grill from the garage. The older kids husked corn, their chatter mingling with the crinkle of husks. One arranged cucumbers on a platter, another carried plates outside, while the youngest stood guard with a spatula, insisting he was the "burger flipper."

Neighbors wandered over, drawn by the smell of sizzling hot dogs and the sound of children squealing in the yard. "Smells wonderful," one called.

"Grab a plate," I answered. "There's plenty."

The picnic table overflowed — corn steaming in foil, cucumbers crisp from the garden, beans bubbling in a pot, buns stacked high. Conversation bubbled just as easily, stories exchanged across plates. Gratitude hummed louder than the cicadas, steady and real. As the sun dipped, fireflies flickered across the lawn.

Barefoot children darted after them, jars glowing like lanterns. Adults leaned back in lawn chairs, laughter rising under the deepening sky. Gratitude swelled in my chest, the kind that aches because you know the moment is both fleeting and eternal all at once.

When the last plate was cleared and the neighbors waved goodnight, I lingered on the porch. The grass was damp with dew again, the stars just beginning to scatter across the sky. Inside, the dishwasher hummed, and the house finally stilled.

I opened my journal one last time and added a final line: *Today was a gift. Thank You, Lord.*

The glow of summer lingered — in the laughter, the food, the fireflies, the quiet gratitude that filled my heart. And I knew: these were the memories that would last, stitched into the season by the steady thread of thankfulness.

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## **Activities & Traditions**

### **Sunset Gratitude Pause**

Choose one evening each week to gather outside as the sun sets. As the sky glows with color, take turns naming one thing you were thankful for that day. The moment becomes both beautiful and grounding.

### **Blessings Basket**

Keep a basket in the kitchen where slips of paper and pens are handy. Each day, everyone adds one blessing. At the end of summer, sit down together and read them all aloud — a story of God's goodness across the season.

### **Gratitude Walk**

Take a slow evening walk through your yard, neighborhood, or even just down the driveway. With each step, name something you're thankful for — a flower, a tree, the laughter of children, the coolness of shade.

### **Porch Blessings Journal**

Set out a notebook on the porch table. Invite family members, neighbors, or visiting friends to jot down something they're grateful for. By the end of the season, you'll have a book full of blessings to reread.

### **Harvest Thankfulness**

When you pick vegetables, fruit, or flowers, pause to say a "thank You" to God for each item as you place it in the basket. This turns ordinary harvesting into a moment of worship.

## **Gratitude Collage**

Save bits and pieces from the summer — a pressed flower, a doodle, a photograph, or a candy wrapper from a favorite treat. At the season's end, create a collage together and label each piece with a thankful note.

## **Thankful Hands**

Trace each person's hand on paper. Inside each outline, write or draw five things you're thankful for, one on each finger. Hang them up to create a wall of gratitude that grows as the season continues.

## **Family Gratitude Meal**

Plan a simple supper — maybe sandwiches, corn on the cob, or a pot of soup. As you sit around the table, go around and share three specific things you're grateful for that week.

## **Gratitude Campfire**

On a cool summer night, gather around a fire pit or bonfire. Hand out slips of paper for each person to write a blessing, then toss them into the flames. As the sparks rise, talk about how gratitude lifts our hearts to God.

## **Glow Jars of Thanks**

Have children decorate jars with tissue paper or paint. Fill them with little notes of gratitude throughout the season. Place a tea light inside and watch them glow at night — a visual reminder that thankfulness brings light.

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## Comfort Foods

### Cold Spaghetti Salad

This one takes me right back to church picnics and family reunions. It's nothing fancy, but it always disappears first. Leftover spaghetti gets a makeover with a bottle of Italian dressing and some fresh vegetables from the garden. It's cool, refreshing, and feeds a crowd with very little effort.

#### *Ingredients*

- 1 lb cooked spaghetti, cooled
- 1 bottle Italian dressing
- 1 cucumber, diced
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 bell pepper, chopped
- ½ cup black olives (optional)
- Salt & pepper to taste

#### *Directions*

Toss the noodles with dressing until well coated. Add the vegetables and olives, then season with salt and pepper. Cover and chill for at least an hour before serving. The flavors deepen as it sits, making it even better the next day.

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### Sliced Watermelon

Some foods don't even need recipes, they just belong at the table. A cold watermelon, sliced into wedges, is as American as summer gets. Nothing says "thank You, Lord, for this season" quite like sticky fingers, juice running down arms, and a heap of rinds left on the plate.

#### *Ingredients*

- 1 large watermelon

#### *Directions*

Chill the melon, slice into wedges, and serve cold. Keep napkins handy.

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## **Garden Cucumbers with Salt & Pepper**

When the garden is full of cucumbers, I keep this as the easiest side dish ever. Wash, slice, sprinkle a little salt and pepper, and they're ready. They taste like cool refreshment on the hottest afternoons.

### *Ingredients*

- 2–3 fresh cucumbers
- Salt & pepper to taste

### *Directions*

Slice cucumbers into rounds or spears. Sprinkle lightly with salt and pepper. Serve cold.

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## **Grilled Chicken Drumsticks**

These always feel like a summer weekend to me. I like to parboil the drumsticks first so they cook evenly, then finish them on the grill for that smoky char. Brushed with barbecue sauce or served plain with hot sauce, they're the kind of food that brings everyone to the table.

### *Ingredients*

- 12 chicken drumsticks
- 1 cup barbecue sauce (or hot sauce)
- Salt & pepper

### *Directions*

Place drumsticks in a pot of salted water and boil for 15 minutes. Remove and pat dry. Preheat grill to medium heat. Grill drumsticks, brushing with sauce and turning occasionally, until cooked through and nicely charred (about 15 minutes).

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## **Taco Salad (Bean Style)**

This is our version of taco salad, and it's a lifesaver on hot days. Instead of meat, we use a can of chili beans, and instead of ranch or salsa dressing, we use Western. It's cool, hearty, and feeds a crowd in minutes.

### *Ingredients*

- 1 head lettuce, chopped
- 1 can chili beans (undrained)
- 2 cups shredded cheddar cheese
- 2 tomatoes, chopped
- 1 small onion, diced
- 1 cup crushed tortilla chips
- 1 bottle Western-style dressing

### *Directions*

In a large bowl, layer lettuce, chili beans, cheese, tomatoes, and onion. Drizzle generously with Western dressing. Top with crushed tortilla chips just before serving. Toss gently and serve right away.

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## **Homemade Chips & Garden Salsa**

Every summer table needs a bowl of salsa and chips. I love making mine with tomatoes from the garden, still warm from the sun. It's fresh, tangy, and has that homemade taste no jar can match.

### *Ingredients*

- 4 ripe tomatoes, chopped
- 1 onion, diced
- 1 jalapeño, minced (optional)
- ¼ cup fresh cilantro, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- Juice of 1 lime
- Salt to taste

### *Directions*

Mix everything in a bowl. Adjust lime and salt as needed. Chill for an hour if you can stand to wait. Serve with tortilla chips.

## **Cornbread Muffins**

Cornbread is comfort food, plain and simple. The muffin version makes it easy to grab and serve, and they come out golden and fluffy every time. A pat of butter melting on top, maybe a drizzle of honey — that's the taste of home.

### *Ingredients*

- 1 cup cornmeal
- 1 cup flour
- ¼ cup sugar
- 1 Tbsp baking powder
- ½ tsp salt
- 1 cup milk
- 1 egg
- ¼ cup melted butter

### *Directions*

Preheat oven to 400°F. Mix dry ingredients in one bowl and wet ingredients in another. Stir together until just blended. Pour into a greased muffin tin and bake 15–18 minutes, until golden and a toothpick comes out clean.

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## **Grilled Sausages with Peppers & Onions**

If you want an easy meal that stretches for company, this is it. Sausages sizzling on the grill with peppers and onions cooked until soft and sweet — it's simple, hearty, and smells so good it will bring neighbors wandering over.

### *Ingredients*

- 6 sausages (bratwurst or Italian)
- 2 bell peppers, sliced
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1 Tbsp olive oil
- Salt & pepper

### *Directions*

Grill sausages until cooked through. In a skillet, sauté peppers and onions in olive oil with salt and pepper until tender. Serve sausages with peppers and onions on top, with or without buns.

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## **Pickled Vegetables**

When the garden is overflowing, I love making a jar or two of quick pickles. They're crunchy, tangy, and a perfect side for just about any summer meal.

### *Ingredients*

- 1 cup vinegar
- 1 cup water
- 2 Tbsp sugar
- 1 Tbsp salt
- Cucumbers, beans, or carrots

### *Directions*

Slice vegetables and pack them in a clean jar. Heat vinegar, water, sugar, and salt until dissolved. Pour over vegetables and let cool. Cover and refrigerate at least 4 hours. Best eaten within a week.

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## **Fresh Summer Berries**

Sometimes the best dessert doesn't need baking at all. A bowl of blueberries, raspberries, or blackberries, chilled and set on the table, is enough. You can add whipped cream if you like, but honestly, summer berries are perfect just as they are.

### *Ingredients*

- 4 cups fresh berries (blueberries, raspberries, blackberries)

### *Directions*

Wash, chill, and serve.

## **Closing Thoughts**

Late summer has a glow all its own. The days are still long, the evenings still warm, but there's a softness that hints at change just around the corner. When I look back on summers gone by, what I remember most aren't the big events — it's the little things: a bowl of cucumbers sprinkled with salt, children chasing fireflies barefoot in the yard, a plate of grilled chicken served hot off the grill, or fresh berries passed around after supper.

Gratitude doesn't need grand gestures. It's born in the ordinary moments — the clatter of dishes cleaned together, the quiet of a sunset walk, or the laughter that floats across a picnic blanket. Choosing to notice and give thanks in those moments is what turns them into memories that last.

This season is a gift, and thankfulness is how we hold it with open hands. Whether it's around a crowded supper table or in a few quiet minutes at the end of the day, gratitude is the glow that lights up even the simplest of days.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. What small, ordinary foods or moments this summer have filled you with gratitude?
  2. How does pausing to say "thank You" to God in the middle of everyday chores change the way you see your work at home?
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3. Which simple foods — like cucumbers, watermelon, or berries — remind you of summer's goodness?
4. How can you involve your family in practicing gratitude so it becomes part of your home's rhythm?
5. Where do you see God's faithful love woven into this season of your life?

## Chapter 10 — Looking Toward Fall

### **Scripture (NLT):**

*"Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord."*

— *Lamentations 3:40*

### **Devotional Reflection**

There's a moment each year when you notice that the air feels just a little bit different. The mornings might greet you with a crispness that wasn't there before, or the evenings settle in faster, reminding you that summer is giving way to fall. You step outside and hear the cicadas grow quieter while the crickets grow louder. A soft breeze carries with it the faintest hint of wood smoke or fallen leaves. It's subtle at first, but unmistakable—the turning of a season.

Fall is one of those seasons that draws us inward, both physically and spiritually. After the bright busyness of summer, fall invites us to slow down, to reflect, and to prepare. There's a rhythm to it that echoes through creation. Farmers gather the last of their harvest. Trees release their leaves to the ground. Even animals begin storing up food and thickening their coats for the winter ahead. Nature itself seems to remind us: this is the season for preparing.

And preparation doesn't just belong to the earth—it belongs to us too. Scripture in Lamentations 3:40 calls us to "examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord." That verse carries the weight of both honesty and hope. It's a call to stop long enough to take a good look at our lives, to see where we've been walking faithfully and where we've wandered off.

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It's an invitation to come back to God, not with shame, but with the assurance that He is always ready to receive us with open arms.

When I think of preparing my home for fall, my mind first goes to the physical things. I picture pulling out cozy blankets for the couch, swapping summer sheets for warmer ones, or stocking my pantry with the makings of hearty soups and breads. There's a joy in baking something warm when the windows fog up from the steam, or lighting a candle that fills the room with the smell of cinnamon or apple spice. These small rituals anchor us to the season and make home feel like a place of safety and welcome.

But as comforting as those physical preparations are, they also serve as reminders of something deeper. Just like my home needs readying for the season ahead, so does my heart. Am I making room for the Lord, or am I cluttered with distractions? Am I slowing down enough to listen to His voice, or am I caught in the whirlwind of activity, even in a quieter season? Preparing the heart is every bit as important as preparing the home.

Maybe this looks like setting aside time for personal reflection, journaling what God has been teaching you in the past months. Perhaps it means examining the rhythms of your family—are your schedules so packed that time together feels like an afterthought? Or it could simply be a matter of drawing near to the Lord again in prayer, confessing the ways you've drifted and asking Him to renew your spirit.

One of the things I love most about fall is how it reminds us of God's faithfulness. Think about it: the trees let go of their leaves, not in fear, but in trust that new growth will come again in spring. The earth goes

into rest, but it is not abandoned—it is being prepared for what's next. In the same way, God calls us to let go of things that no longer serve us, to release habits, attitudes, or even burdens we were never meant to carry. And as we let go, we trust that He is preparing something new and good in us for the seasons to come.

Sometimes letting go is hard. We cling to our routines, our comforts, even our struggles, because they've become familiar. But fall offers a gentle reminder that release is part of renewal. Just as the bare trees stand as a testimony to God's sustaining power, so too can our hearts when we trust Him enough to lay things down.

In practical terms, preparing our hearts and homes might be as simple as starting small. Light a candle during your quiet time as a reminder that God's presence is near. Choose one drawer, one closet, or one corner of your home to bring into order, creating a physical space of peace. Start a simple rhythm of prayer with your family, maybe at the dinner table or before bed, to invite God into the everyday moments of life. These little steps don't have to be grand or perfect—they just need to be intentional.

Fall also has a way of nudging us toward gratitude. As we harvest the last of the gardens or enjoy the bounty at the farmer's market, we're reminded of the goodness of God's provision. Gratitude softens our hearts, pulling our focus away from what we lack and fixing it on what we've been given. And when gratitude fills a home, it changes the atmosphere. Suddenly, the small things—the smell of fresh bread, the crunch of leaves underfoot, the laughter around a table—become glimpses of God's kindness.

So as the season shifts, let's accept the invitation to

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prepare—both heart and home. Let's not enter fall on autopilot, carrying summer's rush with us. Instead, let's pause, examine, release, and return to the Lord. Just as the earth is preparing for rest, so too can we prepare spaces of rest in our homes and souls, spaces where God's peace can dwell richly.

Remember, this isn't about striving for perfection. It's not about creating a picture-perfect fall with matching décor or flawless routines. It's about creating room—room for God, room for family, room for peace. When we align our hearts with Him, every blanket folded, every meal prepared, and every quiet moment of reflection becomes part of a bigger picture: a home and heart that welcome His presence.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. What small signs of fall do you notice around you, and how can they serve as reminders of God's faithfulness?
2. In what areas of your life do you feel God calling you to "examine your ways" as you move into a new season?
3. What is one habit, distraction, or burden you sense God inviting you to release, like the trees release their leaves?
4. How can you prepare your home to feel more like a place of peace and welcome during the fall months?
5. What rhythms of gratitude can you practice as a family this season to help anchor your hearts in God's provision?

## Looking Toward Fall

The first cool morning of September slipped in quietly, almost unnoticed at first. Emily stirred beneath the quilt, sensing the difference before she even opened her eyes. The room felt cooler, the air less heavy than the sticky nights of August. When she pushed herself up and reached for the sweater draped on the chair, she caught the faintest rustle of wind through the trees outside. It was the kind of morning that whispered, *Fall is on its way*. She made her way to the kitchen, where the familiar ritual of brewing coffee waited.

The pot hissed and sputtered, filling the house with the smell of warmth and comfort. She leaned against the counter as the first drops trickled into her mug, gazing out the window to the backyard. The leaves had only just begun to hint at color, their edges brushed with amber and scarlet, as if God had touched each one with His paintbrush overnight. She smiled at the thought. This was always her favorite time of year.

Summer had been full—long days at the lake, sticky popsicle hands, endless piles of wet towels by the back door. It had been good, but exhausting too, the kind of season where schedules loosen and mess multiplies without notice. She loved watching her children run wild in the sun, but now, as the air cooled, Emily found herself longing for rhythm again. She wanted slower evenings, hearty dinners, and mornings that began with more than chaos and sunscreen. She wanted her home to breathe differently, to carry the quiet order that fall always brought.

The sound of feet shuffling across the hallway broke her thoughts. Little Ben, still in pajamas patterned with rockets, stumbled into the kitchen rubbing his eyes.

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“It’s cold, Mama,” he said, climbing onto a chair at the table. Emily set down her mug, pulled a blanket from the back of the couch, and tucked it around his small shoulders. “That’s because fall is coming,” she whispered, pressing a kiss to his messy hair. “We’ll get used to it.”

By the time the older two, Lucy and Hannah, wandered in, the kitchen smelled of cinnamon toast and coffee. Emily loved this moment—her children gathered, cheeks flushed with sleep, the day still new and full of promise.

She watched Lucy chatter about the book she was reading while Hannah carefully spread peanut butter on her toast, always deliberate, always precise. They were each so different, yet so much a part of her. She made a mental note to write it down in her journal later, a habit she had kept since they were babies, recording little moments that might otherwise fade.

After breakfast, the house shifted into the hum of routine. School books appeared on the table, pencils sharpened, papers spread. Emily had always chosen to homeschool, not because it was the easiest path, but because she loved the closeness it created—the chance to shape not just their learning, but their hearts. Fall always made homeschooling feel more natural, somehow. The cooler weather pulled them inside, and the cozy rhythms of reading and writing matched the quiet world outside. Today, Lucy practiced multiplication while Hannah copied verses in her careful handwriting.

Ben sat beside them with a stack of blocks, insisting he was doing “math” too.

Emily moved between them, guiding, encouraging, correcting gently where needed. She paused to pour another cup of coffee, then glanced around the room.

The morning light slanted across the wooden table, catching the dust motes in its path. A candle flickered on the counter, filling the room with the scent of apple spice. And for a moment, she felt a deep, unshakable peace. Life wasn't perfect, the to-do list was long, but right here, right now, things were good.

By midday, lessons were finished and the children spilled outside to play. Emily opened the windows to let in the crisp air and turned her attention to the house. Fall cleaning had always been her quiet joy, a way to reset after summer's carefree mess. She moved through each room slowly, folding blankets, stacking books, and swapping bright summer décor for warmer, cozier touches. A plaid throw on the couch, a bowl of apples on the counter, a wreath of dried leaves by the door—small changes, but each one whispered, *welcome, fall.*

She paused in the hallway, looking at the closet overflowing with shoes and jackets. With a sigh, she pulled everything out, making piles—summer sandals that could be stored, sweatshirts to wash, boots to check for size. The children would need new coats before long, she realized, adding it to the list in her planner. Homemaking wasn't glamorous, but these small acts of preparation felt holy to her. It was a way of creating a refuge, a space where her family could feel grounded and safe no matter what the outside world brought.

Later that afternoon, Emily started dinner early. She pulled carrots, onions, and potatoes from the pantry, humming as she chopped. A pot of beef stew simmered on the stove, filling the air with the rich smell of comfort. Bread dough rose on the counter beneath a towel, ready to be baked just in time for supper. She

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glanced at the clock and smiled. In the summer, they often ate late, drifting in from the yard at different times. But fall brought them back to the table, together, just as the sun slipped away.

When her husband, Mark, walked in the door, the children rushed to greet him, their laughter echoing down the hallway. Emily stood in the doorway of the kitchen, apron dusted with flour, and felt her heart swell at the sight. These were the moments she prayed she would never take for granted—the sound of voices, the clatter of dishes, the ordinary joy of a family gathered.

Dinner was lively, filled with stories of the day and Ben's endless questions about how leaves change color. Lucy shared her book report, Hannah talked about her piano lesson, and Mark teased them all until the room erupted in laughter. Emily sat back, spoon in hand, and thought, *This is what it means to be rich*. Not in money, but in love, in togetherness, in the sacred ordinary.

After the table was cleared, the family settled into the living room. Mark built a small fire in the fireplace, the first of the season, and the children sprawled on the rug with board games. Emily curled into her favorite chair with her knitting, the flicker of the flames casting warmth across the room. She felt the tension of summer busyness slipping away, replaced by the steadiness of fall's embrace.

As the evening wore on, she tucked the children into bed one by one, listening to their prayers and smoothing hair back from their foreheads. In the quiet that followed, Emily returned to the kitchen, now dim and still. She poured one last cup of tea and opened her journal, writing down the small moments of the day—the first fire, the stew simmering, Ben's blanket at

breakfast. She ended the page with a simple prayer:  
*Lord, help me prepare not just this home, but my heart.  
Let this season draw me closer to You.*

She closed the book, blew out the candle, and glanced once more around the room. The house wasn't perfect. The laundry still waited in baskets, the closet still needed sorting, and tomorrow would bring its own share of noise and mess. But tonight, as the cool air drifted through the open window and the steady hum of crickets filled the dark, Emily felt a quiet readiness settle over her. Fall had come, and her heart—and her home—were prepared to welcome it.

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## **Activities**

### **A Closet and Coat Check**

Spend an afternoon going through jackets, sweaters, and boots. Make sure everything fits each family member, wash what needs freshening, and set aside a donation bag for anything too small or unused. This little ritual not only organizes your home but also prepares your heart by practicing release and generosity.

### **Soup Night Tradition**

Choose one evening a week to be “soup night.” Try a different recipe each time—vegetable beef, creamy potato, chicken noodle, or even chili. Light a candle, set the table, and let the warmth of a simple meal draw your family together as the nights grow cooler.

### **Gratitude Jar**

Place a jar on your kitchen counter or dining table with small slips of paper beside it. Each evening, invite family members to write down one thing they’re thankful for and place it inside. By the end of the season, you’ll have a jar full of reminders of God’s faithfulness.

### **Morning with the Lord**

As fall brings quieter mornings, choose one day each week to rise just 15 minutes earlier than usual. Make a cup of coffee or tea, open your Bible, and read slowly, jotting down one verse to carry with you. Let this set the rhythm for your week.

## **A Family Walk**

Bundle up and head outside to enjoy the changing colors. Bring along a bag and collect leaves, pinecones, or acorns. Later, place them in a bowl or vase as a natural centerpiece—an easy, free way to decorate and a sweet memory to share.

## **Reset a Room**

Choose one room in your home to “reset” for fall. Declutter surfaces, add a blanket or two, and switch out one decoration for something cozy—a candle, a basket of apples, or a simple wreath. Preparing your home in this way often mirrors preparing your heart: small changes make a big difference.

## **Write a Seasonal Letter**

Take an evening to write a letter to yourself or your family about what you hope this fall will hold. Write down prayers, intentions, and even the little traditions you want to begin. Tuck the letter into a journal or Bible, and revisit it when winter comes.

## **Practice Letting Go**

Find one habit, item, or even schedule commitment that no longer serves your family, and let it go—just as the trees release their leaves. Pray as you do it, asking God to help you hold space for what truly matters this season.

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## **Comfort Foods for Summer's End**

There comes a turning point every year when the foods we crave begin to change. After months of popsicles, watermelon slices, grilled burgers, and endless sandwiches eaten on the porch, our bodies and hearts start longing for something different. The mornings are cooler, the evenings come sooner, and suddenly the meals we once loved feel a little too light. That's when comfort food begins to call.

Comfort food, for me, isn't just about the recipe. It's about gathering the family around the table, filling the house with the smell of something baking or simmering, and watching everyone take that first bite with a sigh of happiness. It's simple, it's familiar, and it's satisfying — the food that bridges the gap between summer's playfulness and fall's cozy evenings.

Here are some of our favorite comfort foods to enjoy as summer winds down and fall peeks around the corner.

### **Zucchini Boats**

When the garden zucchinis grow too big to slice up for sautéing, they're perfect for boats. Scooping out the middle and stuffing them with a hearty filling makes a fun, filling dinner. Kids love them because they look like little edible "boats," and moms love them because they stretch a pound of meat or even work meatless with rice and cheese.

#### **Ingredients:**

- 3 medium zucchini (halved lengthwise)
- 1 lb ground beef, turkey, or sausage (or swap with 1 cup cooked rice for vegetarian)
- 1 small onion, diced

- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 cup spaghetti sauce (or tomato sauce)
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella or cheddar cheese
- 2 tbsp Parmesan cheese
- 1 tsp Italian seasoning
- Salt & pepper to taste

### **Directions:**

1. Preheat oven to 375°F. Slice zucchini in half lengthwise and scoop out the pulp, leaving about ¼ inch thick shells. Place in a greased baking dish.
  2. In a skillet, cook meat with onion and garlic until browned. Drain. Stir in sauce, Italian seasoning, salt, and pepper.
  3. Spoon mixture into zucchini shells. Sprinkle with mozzarella and Parmesan.
  4. Cover with foil and bake 25–30 minutes until zucchini is tender. Remove foil for the last few minutes to brown cheese.
  5. Serve warm, with garlic bread or salad.
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## **BBQ Chicken Flatbreads**

This is one of those recipes that feels playful, almost like summer still lingers, but it's baked and melty enough to belong to fall too. Perfect for using leftover grilled chicken, and easy enough that the kids can help make them.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 cups cooked chicken, shredded
- ½ cup BBQ sauce
- 4 pieces naan or flatbread
- 1 ½ cups shredded mozzarella cheese
- ½ small red onion, thinly sliced
- ½ cup fresh cilantro (optional)

### **Directions:**

1. Preheat oven to 400°F. Mix chicken with BBQ sauce.
  2. Place flatbreads on a baking sheet. Top with chicken, cheese, and onion slices.
  3. Bake 8–10 minutes, until cheese is melted and edges are crisp.
  4. Sprinkle with cilantro before serving.
- These are fun cut into wedges for sharing, or serve whole for a quick, cozy dinner.

## **Skillet Gnocchi with Vegetables**

Gnocchi are little potato dumplings that cook up fast and feel extra hearty. Tossing them in a skillet with vegetables and garlic butter makes a comforting meal that feels special but takes less than 20 minutes.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 package (16 oz) potato gnocchi
- 2 tbsp butter or olive oil
- 1 pint cherry tomatoes, halved
- 2 cups fresh spinach or kale
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ cup Parmesan cheese
- Salt & pepper to taste

### **Directions:**

1. Cook gnocchi according to package directions; drain.
2. In a large skillet, melt butter over medium heat. Add garlic, tomatoes, and spinach. Cook until tomatoes soften and spinach wilts.
3. Add gnocchi to skillet, stirring until coated. Season with salt and pepper.
4. Sprinkle with Parmesan and serve warm.

It's quick, it's cozy, and even picky kids love those pillowy gnocchi.

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## **Steak Salad with Roasted Corn**

This salad is hearty enough to be dinner. Juicy grilled steak slices over greens, topped with roasted corn, cherry tomatoes, and avocado. It's fresh like summer but filling like fall — the best of both seasons in one bowl.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 lb steak (sirloin or flank)
- 2 ears corn, roasted or grilled, kernels cut off
- 2 cups cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 avocado, diced
- 6 cups mixed greens
- Dressing: ranch, chipotle ranch, or balsamic vinaigrette
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### **Directions:**

1. Season steak with salt and pepper; grill or pan-sear to desired doneness. Let rest, then slice thin.
2. In a large bowl, arrange greens. Top with corn, tomatoes, avocado, and steak slices.
3. Drizzle with dressing and toss lightly.

A salad that actually feels like comfort food!

## **Chicken Parmesan with Pasta**

Chicken Parmesan is one of those meals that makes everyone happy. Crispy breaded chicken patties, topped with sauce and melty mozzarella, served over a plate of spaghetti. Cozy, filling, and classic.

### **Ingredients:**

- 4 breaded chicken patties (homemade or store-bought)
- 2 cups spaghetti sauce
- 2 cups mozzarella cheese, shredded
- ½ cup Parmesan cheese
- 1 lb spaghetti

### **Directions:**

1. Preheat oven to 375°F. Place chicken patties on a baking sheet, spoon sauce over each, and sprinkle with mozzarella and Parmesan. Bake 20 minutes until cheese is melted.
2. Meanwhile, cook spaghetti according to package directions; drain.
3. Serve chicken over spaghetti with extra sauce.

This is one of those “no one complains” dinners — and sometimes, that’s the biggest win of all.

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## **Baked Potato Bar**

This is less of a recipe and more of a fun family dinner idea. Bake a tray of russet potatoes, set out a spread of toppings, and let everyone make their own. The kids love the creativity, and it's surprisingly filling.

### **Topping Ideas:**

- Sour cream, butter, shredded cheese
- Steamed broccoli, chili, bacon bits
- Salsa, taco meat, or BBQ chicken

Bake potatoes at 400°F for about 1 hour until tender. Split open, fluff with a fork, and pile on the toppings. Perfect for a Friday night dinner.

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## **Harvest Grain Bowls**

Grain bowls are cozy and nourishing, especially when topped with roasted late-summer vegetables. They're customizable, so each person can build their own.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 cups cooked farro, quinoa, or brown rice
- 1 cup roasted corn
- 1 cup black beans, rinsed
- 1 roasted sweet potato, cubed
- 1 avocado, diced
- Dressing: simple olive oil + lime juice or chipotle ranch

Layer grains in bowls, top with veggies, beans, and avocado, then drizzle with dressing. These bowls are colorful, hearty, and so easy to pull together.

## **Baked Spaghetti**

This is classic spaghetti, but baked with layers of cheese until bubbly. It feeds a crowd and reheats beautifully — the kind of dish everyone goes back for seconds on.

### **Ingredients:**

- 1 lb spaghetti
- 1 jar (24 oz) spaghetti sauce
- 1 lb ground beef or sausage
- 2 cups mozzarella cheese
- ½ cup Parmesan cheese

### **Directions:**

1. Cook pasta and drain. Brown meat in a skillet; stir in sauce.
2. In a 9x13 dish, layer spaghetti, sauce, and cheese. Repeat layers until dish is full.
3. Top with remaining cheese and bake at 375°F for 25–30 minutes until bubbly.

It's spaghetti night, but even better.

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## **Banana Pudding Cups**

This dessert is as simple as it is beloved. Cool, creamy layers of vanilla pudding, sliced bananas, and cookies make the perfect ending to a comfort meal.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 boxes (3.4 oz each) vanilla pudding mix
- 4 cups milk
- 1 box vanilla wafers
- 3 bananas, sliced
- 1 tub whipped topping

### **Directions:**

1. Prepare pudding with milk as directed.
2. In cups or a large dish, layer wafers, bananas, pudding, and whipped topping. Repeat layers.
3. Chill at least 2 hours before serving.

The best part? Everyone digs in and suddenly the bowl is empty.

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## **S'mores Bars**

When campfires aren't possible, bring the flavor indoors with these gooey bars. Graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallows baked together — it's summer and fall all in one bite.

### **Ingredients:**

- 2 cups graham cracker crumbs
- ½ cup butter, melted
- 2 cups mini marshmallows
- 1 ½ cups chocolate chips

### **Directions:**

1. Mix graham crumbs and butter; press into greased 9x13 pan.
2. Sprinkle chocolate chips and marshmallows over crust.
3. Bake at 350°F for 15–20 minutes until golden and gooey.

Cut into squares and enjoy the taste of a summer bonfire right at the kitchen table.

## **Closing Reflection**

As summer fades and fall begins, we are reminded that every season has its purpose. Some days are full of sunshine and freedom, others call us back into routine and rhythm. Just like the earth, our homes and hearts move through these changes too. Preparing meals, lighting candles, baking bread, or stirring a pot of soup may seem ordinary, but they are sacred in their own way. These small acts of care weave the story of family life and create the atmosphere our loved ones will remember most.

It isn't about having the perfect menu or a flawless home. It's about showing up each day with love, creating space for togetherness, and welcoming God into the ordinary rhythms of life. May your table be a place of laughter, your home a place of peace, and your heart a place of rest. As this season changes once again, take courage in knowing that He who holds the seasons also holds you — steady, faithful, and full of new mercies for the days ahead.

This is the end of this book, but it's never the end of the story you're writing in your own home. Each meal you serve, each tradition you build, and each prayer you whisper over your family matters more than you know. May these words, recipes, and reflections be a companion to you as you create a life filled with comfort, balance, and joy.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. What simple comfort foods or traditions make your family feel most "at home" as seasons shift?
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2. How do you see God's faithfulness in the changing rhythms of your household?
3. In what small ways can you create comfort for yourself as well as for those you love?
4. Looking back over this book, what practices or ideas do you most want to carry with you into the next season?
5. How might you pause more often to savor the beauty of ordinary days at home?