

Summer is a time for steamy sunsets, golden days, warm breezes, and straight-up crazy living spaces. We're talking kids, water messes, dirt, chalk-hands, missing sandals, and haphazard schedules. I don't know about you, but while the teachers are celebrating, I'm inwardly shuddering. And outwardly. I love my children. I love them. I LOVE them.

Also, summer is a time for parents to unwind and for children to hunker down in front of the television. Last summer we survived, but this summer, I want us to thrive. At our last MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) meeting, our leader asked the question, "What inspires you?" Friends, what inspires you?

Let's have an inspired summer. Let's have inspired days, thoughtful evenings, and breezy memories.

Friends, mamas, let us journey into these glistening days with smiles on our faces and a plan of attack.

Some are simple, some will involve a bit of planning, and all will bring laughter, smiles, giggles, and picture-worthy moments. Share the posts, comment, supply your own pics, and make sure to use the hashtag #epicsummer17. Each week will give you a **Risk** to do or a **Reality** upon which to meditate. You can do the Risk/Reality that day or some time that week. Each week will have a theme and an encouraging note to go along with it. The more of us, the merrier, in my opinion. I hope you will join me in taking charge over your summer. Make amazing happen to your family. Make fabulous memories. Create magic with your treasures, however old they may be. Our children will have the memories that we provide for them. What do you want them to remember from 2017? What do *you* want to remember?

Let's make it an Epic Summer.

Week 1: Sugar and Sprinkles and All That Twinkles

Risk: Make cookies together and decorate them. Be sure to have an abundance of sprinkles.

Reality: What's your favorite thing about being a girl? What's your least favorite thing? What can you do specifically as a woman and mom to inspire another female to appreciate who she is? Do that thing.

Devotional thought/encouragement –

"Discover beauty in everyone." Romans 12:17b

We've all got some kind of beauty just waiting to shine. Find your starlight and shimmer, darlings. Find it in yourself and allow it to shine in others as well. You are perfectly allowed to be brilliant. I hope you will.

And in some fantastic way you can help others discover their light as well. Someone needs your sparkle today. Who is it? Sit and think for a moment about how you can make a moment special for someone. Write a note, send a text, offer a hug, or drop off coffee with a person who needs some beauty (or caffeine!).

The ideal woman, to me, is one who can uplift those around her with grace. She looks different in every body on this planet, but she's there. How can you build the lives of those around you? "When you talk, do not say harmful things. But say what people need – words that will help others become stronger" (Ephesians 4:29). Be willing to wait instead of whipping out instruction, criticism, or snapping in frustration. Say the good words, speak the life, and offer what people need. They need love and grace. Offer it to yourself first, and then allow it to spread around.

And then go have a cookie. You deserve it.

Week 2: Snakes and Snails and Superhero Tales

Risk: Catch a lightning bug in a jar! (or any bug if you can't find a lightning bug) Use chalk and draw on the patio. Draw a lifesize Tic Tac Toe board and use toys as the pieces to play.

Reality: There's some guy in your life who's the daddy to your littles. What's your favorite thing about him? What's your least favorite thing about him? Say a prayer for that thing specifically. Ask God to help you have patience with those good and bad things. If you would like, write a note or text or even tell him in person that thing you appreciate most about him. If you're struggling with that relationship, write down the heart of the trouble of that frustration, and find a Bible verse that will encourage you to face it with hope, grace, and peace.

Devotional thought/encouragement

God entrusted Nehemiah with the task of rebuilding a crazy huge wall. Nehemiah was just this ordinary guy, with two eyes and a brain, and a passion for his heritage. The task presented itself to him, and Nehemiah said, well, uh, okay. Sometimes, that's how heroes deal with things. Actually, that is precisely what heroes do to deal with things. Situations present themselves and that unsuspecting hero must decide how to react. Choose to react like the hero. Say a prayer for strength, and then do those hard but awesome things. Nehemiah prayed, "For now, my God, strengthen me" (Nehemiah 6:9B). He knew the power that God would equip him with, especially in those hard moments of starting this monumental project of building a wall around a city. By hand. In the sun. Without electricity. Or coffee.

I mean.

For now, my God, strengthen me.

And they rocked that wall-building.

You will have many challenges today. For both our sakes I hope we don't have to build walls, and by all means let's try to build relationships that transcend walls, amiright? Capture the hearts of those around you and spread peace. Share joy. Share light. Share love. Instill hope in your life and those around you.

Peace, joy, light, hope, these can be some of the most challenging tasks to complete. If you're a human like me, then every day brings up a new round in the boxing ring. But we've got instructions to overcome those. David wrote in Psalm 34, "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and try to maintain it." The Message version says, "Embrace peace—don't let it get away!"

If you have a challenging person in your life, or actually if you have any people in your life, then you'll find peace barging out the door more often than you'd like. Don't let peace get away. The best way to get peace back into your house is to pray that God will help you see the good in each heart around. This is a hard task; but God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, love, and a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7). You can create peace in your home. This doesn't always mean there will be a home-cooked pie on the counter, crisp clean sheets on the bed, and nary a speck of dust on the shelves. (Does that ever happen? Can I come over if this is your house?) But peace dwells in the homes where people seek God's heart and his hope first. Peace reigns where hearts produce hope and offer first a helping hand instead of a hardened fist.

Start building peace by cleaning out those dark spaces. Unload those boxes of regret and hurt, empty them out in prayer to your Creator, and he will help repaint the walls. First God. Then answers. Write down one of these verses we've discussed today and place it by a mirror. Make those first reactions ones of patience. And you'll have the strength to build the walls layered with hope and packed with heart.

Week 3: Let's Go Fly A Kite

Risk: Buy kites from the dollar store and take the kids to the park for a lunch and a kite flying session. Take water.

Reality: What's a character trait where you soar? What's a talent of yours that you'd like to see improve? Spend thirty minutes doing that thing which makes your soul soar. What is a talent or passion your child(ren) have? Let them spend thirty minutes doing that thing.

Devotional thought/encouragement-- 2 Timothy 1:12 – "But I have no regrets. I couldn't be more sure of my ground—the One I've trusted in can take care of what he's trusted me to do right to the end."

God has entrusted your dreams and talents to you. Only you can fill them and use them fully. Enjoy what is yours and give it away freely.

Week 4 : I Scream, You Scream

Risk: Buy or borrow an ice cream maker from a friend. Make some ice cream! Do a taste test and compare with some store bought ice cream. Which is better? Post pics of the tasting.

Reality: Are you a yeller? How do you handle frustration? Name three things that make you angry. Now list how you will handle those things happening in your life. Find a Bible verse for each occasion and write each on a card. Post those cards around your house to help you remember to face those tough times with peace and love.

Devotional thought/encouragement

With God we will perform valiantly; he will trample our foes. Psalms 60:12

The king granted my requests, for I was graciously strengthened by my God. Nehemiah 2:8

Week 5: Stars and Stripes

Risk: Everyone draws and colors stars, and then cuts them out. Tape them all around the house and have the kids go on a star hunt.

Reality: Take the kids out for a picnic dinner. Do sparkler fireworks and watch the sunset together. Make a wish upon the first star you each see.

Devotional thought/encouragement

"I was going through some hard times in my life the past few years, and part of the minutia of that is we struggle with fears and insecurities or something terrible, like broken and abusive homes. The spectrum is wide of what people are fearing, and in all of those situations, God can make you brave and not afraid. You don't have to fear, because God is with you. The theological aspect of not being afraid is that I have become more and more comfortable that God called me and I chose Him because He chose me without getting into a deep theological discussion. He first loved us." John Cooper

http://www.newreleasetoday.com/article.php?article_id=1842

Philippians 4:6-7 (NIV): "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Psalm 124:8 (VOICE): "Our help has come in the name of the Eternal, the Maker of heaven and earth!"

Romans 8:38-39 (NIV): "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"Those who are wise will shine like the bright expanse of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." Daniel 12:3

Week 6: That's Twisted, Yo

Risk: Purchase a tie-dye kit and make some fun clothes with/for your kids. If you want to include the littles, let them color a picture, scan it, and print out on iron-on transfer paper (<https://www.amazon.com/Epson-Transfer-8-5x11-Inches-S041153/dp/B00004TS2H>)

Reality: "Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful." ~ William Morris. What do you have in your life that is beautiful? List out loud five things. What do you have in your life that is not beautiful or useful? Have each family member collect five of these things and donate them or dispose of them. If it is a character flaw, write it on a card, and write two ways you can do right.

Devotional thought/encouragement

"So we must not get tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don't give up."
Galatians 6:9

"Rest in God alone, my soul, for my hope comes from Him." Psalms 62:5

Week 7: Old MacDonald Had A Zoo, E-I-E-I-U

Risk: Take the family to a farmer's market, farm, or zoo. Can you do all three in a week? Have your children pick a favorite animal, go to the library, and check out two books (one fiction, one non-fiction) about that animal.

Reality: Family outings can be hard and stressful. Take time to have an hour-long relaxing activity. Take a nap, take a long bath, read a book in a hammock, get a massage, get a haircut, get a pedicure or manicure, or go shopping by yourself. Treat yourself! Take care of yourself so that you can manage your zoo.

Devotional thought/encouragement

"You can have peace in me. In this world you will have trouble. But be brave! I have defeated the world!" John 16:33

The Lord your God is with you, the mighty warrior who saves." Zephaniah 3:17

Week 8: Campy

Risk: Pick a theme for your family campout: jungle safari, amazon swamp, desert, mountain climbers, ocean explorers. Camp out in the living room and draw pictures of your location. Watch a family movie in that theme. End the evening with s'mores.

Reality: What's your favorite or least favorite thing about camping? What's a favorite memory you have of family vacations? Put a family vacation on the calendar where your children can create favorite memories.

Devotional thought/encouragement

"Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this." Esther 4:14b. Don't wait to make memories. You can offer yourself and your ideas to your family. They need them. Intentionally create lasting memories. What do you want your children to remember? How will you fill your days? Make them shine.

Week 9: Doldrums – Pirate Theme

Risk: Set up a "boat" in your backyard and spray the kids with water in their swimming suits, and have a sword fight. Make pirate hats out of newspaper. Get with a friend and take a ride on a boat. Set up a picnic at the state park by the lake. Draw a map and have the kids go on a treasure hunt (treasure can be candy or treats from the dollar store in a fun box). Use the words "Arrr," "Me Hearty," "Avast," and "Swab the deck."

Reality: What are pirates? Are you a pirate? Have you ever pirated music, movies, or goods from a store? Who steals from you? What do you steal from others? What can you do to restore those losses? Pick three ways you can undo the piracy in your life. Write them down and do them.

Devotional thought/encouragement:

"The Lord is the one who will go before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not be afraid or discouraged." Deuteronomy 31:8

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the suffering and afflicted. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted, to announce liberty to captives, and to open the eyes of the blind. ²He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of God's favor to them has come, and the day of his wrath to their enemies. ³To all who mourn in Israel he will give: beauty for ashes; joy instead of mourning; praise instead of heaviness." Isaiah 61:1-6a (TLB)

Week 10: A Tisket, A Tasket

Risk: This will take some planning. Find a nearby farm and go berry or fruit picking. Talk to another mom or two and make it an outing. Take a picnic lunch. Post pics!

Reality: Are you good at gardening? What seeds do you plant in your and your family's lives? Do you plant seeds of faith, love, peace, and encouragement? What one thing do you most hope to pass along to your children? Spend a few minutes talking to your child about that thing. Buy a journal for your child and write the first entry in it about that one thing. Be sure to date the entry.

Devotional thought/encouragement

“There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears.” Philippians 13:6

Week 11: Grab your broolly! It's a soaker!

Risk: Play at a splash pad/ do sprinkler activities. Take pictures of someone jumping into the water and post them!

Reality: What's your favorite form of water? Swimming, hot tub, drinking, shower, bath? Do that activity.

Devotional thought/encouragement: Why do we have water? What would we do without water? How can we be grateful on rainy days (hypothetical or not!)

(broolly is “umbrella” in Australian slang.)

I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches from secret places, so that you may know that I, Yahweh, the God of Israel call you by your name. Isaiah 45:3

Week 12: A Benevolent Brotherhood of Man

Risk: make homemade pizzas. Let the kids pick their own toppings at the store! Post picks of the shopping trip and pizza making!

Reality: Write a letter to your kids about what you hope for their futures.

Devotional thought/encouragement

“There is a Brotherhood of Man,
A Benevolent Brotherhood of Man,
A noble tie that binds
All human hearts and minds
Into one Brotherhood of Man.
Your lifelong membership is free.
Keep a-givin' each brother all you can.
Oh aren't you proud to be
In that fraternity,

The great big Brotherhood of Man?”

(~How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying)

“By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed and went out to a place he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out, not knowing where he was going. 9By faith he stayed as a foreigner in the land of promise, living in tents with

Isaac and Jacob, coheirs of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Hebrews 11:8-10

"We who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope as an anchor for our lives, safe and secure." Hebrews 11:18b-19a