

Welcome Home Devotions

As teachers, we have an amazing opportunity and privilege to share the precious gospel with our students and their families. However, we all know individuals who have strayed from the Word or have begun to stray. Following is a series of devotions that can be shared with fellow staff members or used individually. Suggested dates are included but the devotions can be used at any time.

May the Lord bless your time in his Word and your efforts to reach out to those you know and care about and welcome them home to their church, their family of believers, and most importantly—to their Savior.

Devotion 1 (September 23)

Welcome! Love with no conditions.

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.
1 John 4:16

Lessons:

- Model Christ's love.
- Because I am thankful for Christ's work for me
- Love builds connection which builds influence.

You know that person, right? That person who loves you no matter what. There is nothing that you could do to break it. When you think about them, you can feel their warmth, care and concern for you. For me, as a child, that was grandma. Her loving smile, embrace, gifts, and care never changed. Ever. And that was despite my being a little boy who got into mischief, who argued with his brothers, and who accidentally broke things. Earthly love with no conditions is beautiful, heart-warming, and truly impactful.

In 1 John 4, we see the true foundation of love with no conditions. "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them." Consider the impact of God's love for us. Christ has washed clean every single sin that we have ever committed and ever will commit. That is no small task. And he knows all of them, even the thoughts that no one on the face of this earth will ever know ... the ones that would push us to red-faced embarrassment should they be found out. We have so much to be thankful for in our private relationship with our loving brother and Savior, Jesus.

As teachers, we have the opportunity each day to model Christ's love with no conditions in our classrooms, on the playground, and wherever we serve. That modeling can only happen as we are filled with God's grace and as the Holy Spirit empowers us through a deep and recurring connection to the Word and Sacraments. Only then can our modeling reflect Christ's love—even though imperfectly, but still by God's design.

What does that look like in your classroom, office, field, or stage? If you weren't aware, we work with sinful students, parents, and coworkers. It is easy to become frustrated or maybe even resentful of the sin in other's lives that cause us pain in our lives. In those moments which may even happen today, remember that Christ's love living through us builds real, meaningful connections with those we serve. It allows us the opportunity to exert positive Christian influence as a family of faith. We are able to have real conversations about our faith, our struggles, and how God continues to guide us until we all reach eternity. It even gives us the opportunity to encourage students, parents, and coworkers to stay connected to Jesus and the spiritual power he wants us to have through regular worship with the family of believers.

May God grant you a joy that is rooted in your faith that understands his love with no conditions and allows you to model that love to those you serve today. God wants to build his kingdom as he lives through you!

Prayer Reflection: Write down the name of a family or student who may have disconnected from regular connection to the Word and Sacraments. Pray for that family and ask God to influence you to love them and model Christ's love with no conditions. Pray that God would give you an opportunity to reconnect them in any way to his Word.

Devotion 2 (September 30)

Welcome! Build relationships today.

Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.
Thessalonians 2:7–8

Lessons:

- We care about and treat our students like family just as our God has treated us.
- Relationships build trust.
- Relationships allow for real conversations about faith.

My mother always called herself the “mean lady” in the neighborhood. We never seemed to get away with much as she was always watching us from a distance to make sure my brothers and I behaved as we were supposed to. I remember specifically one time we were up to no good, and when I looked up ... there was mom, both hands on her hips, and we knew we were going to spend some time paying our disciplinary dues.

At the time, it wasn't a pleasant experience. But now I can laugh and recognize that my mom was loving us through discipline. In a family, love can take on so many different forms. It's serving one another by cleaning up or cooking meals. It's a kind word of encouragement when we are feeling down. It's enjoying one another's company by snuggling on the couch and falling asleep on a movie night. Love in a family is powerful.

In a Christ-centered family, that love is built on the truths of Scripture—a reflection of the love with no conditions that God offers us freely through Jesus. In a school or classroom, it is no different. You might be referred to as the mean teacher, and the kids might straighten up when they see you walk into the room, but they do that because of the love you show to them, not fear. Whether consciously or subconsciously, they know that God's love guides you. How? Because you model it and talk about it.

Today's verses give us some encouragement. “Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.” Notice the connection to relationships. They shared spiritual love, but they also shared their lives. They had genuine and meaningful relationships with one another.

That is the type of connection that teachers get to have with students. They build trusting relationships on the foundation of Christ's work. They open their lives to their students and share the gospel at every turn. Those relationships build a high level of trust.

And here's the kicker. Trust provides opportunity. There may be students in your classrooms today or your classrooms of old who are not continuing to stay connected to God's Word. Their connection to the lifeline of Scripture may slowly be getting choked off. And that has eternal consequences.

As you walk into your classroom or school today to faces of God's children that may be sleepy, angry, overflowing with energy, or just there, may God strengthen your ability to build relationships. May God help you to use those relationships to encourage connection to the beautiful Gospel message, because that message motivates us for today and secures our future in heaven.

Prayer Reflection: Look around your school or classroom today. Identify students and families that may be disconnected from the Word. Take a moment to write them a note or text them right now to encourage and invite them to connect to the Word with you—at church, over a devotion, or over coffee. Pray that God would work through you to connect with someone who may be straying from the life-giving Word.

Devotion 3 (October 7)

Welcome! Connect to the means of grace.

So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:11

Lessons:

Don't underestimate the power of God's Word.

Helping people reconnect with the Word in worship is worth the conversation.

Out of love, ask someone to come to church on Welcome Home Sunday.

I grew up in the Midwest. The only interaction I had with the ocean was through pictures, TV, or movies. I remember watching surfers in California gracefully maneuver over the waves. It looked so peaceful and like so much fun. Then, the time came for me to get my chance to venture into the ocean. My first call was to Southern California, so the ocean was within reach! When I got to the ocean for the first time, the smells, sounds, and sights were just as I had imagined. My childhood exposure from across the country didn't lie. Then, one of my friends, a native of California, told me it was time to go out into the waves and take our turn at boogie boarding. Surfing was too hard for day one! He gave me a quick lesson on how to go out into the waves and where to catch them to ride them back in. One of the first waves I caught was way too late, and the wave picked me up, then slammed me down into the ground, and rolled me around like I was in a washing machine. I walked out of the ocean with a bloodied shoulder and a mouth full of sand. I had no clue what power waves had!

Sometimes it is easy to downplay or forget about the power that everyday things have. There is "hurtful power," like being shocked by bare wires or slamming your finger in a car door. And there is "helpful power"—not the churning of breakers on the beach but hydroelectric power generated by massive turbines deep in a dam. Do we fully recognize the power of God's Word for daily life? Or do we not think that much about it?

We are blessed to be teachers in Christian schools where we don't only use the Bible some of the day, but we use it to frame every subject that we teach. God's love through his Word is woven into the fabric of the day for our students, and in that way the Holy Spirit is given the opportunity each day to work in the hearts of our students, and our hearts!

God tells us in Isaiah 55, "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." Each day, we walk into our classrooms armed with the most powerful weapon of all time, and God promises us that it will work! And for most people, the most powerful and formative encounter with the Word happens in worship—not merely the content of the readings and sermon, but also the weekly reinforcement of the liturgy, and the deep impact of the Word expressed in hymns.

As you go about the privilege of your called work today, may God fill you with the knowledge that his Word will not return to him empty. Be encouraged to use it and have loving conversations to keep students and families connected to this spiritual power source (especially as it is delivered in worship) and not to minimize or forget its power.

Prayer Reflection: Invite someone to Welcome Home Sunday at your church. Help them understand that you love them enough to connect to God's powerful Word with them. Ask God to give you the courage and strength to help others gain access to his Word who may not be currently connected.

Devotion 4 (October 14)

Welcome! That someone is someone.

Read Acts 8:26–35—the account of Philip and the Ethiopian.

You saw someone you were pretty sure you knew. But you saw them out of context. Too many years, too many faces. A former student? Someone from the old neighborhood? Everyone has found themselves at the awkward moment of recognition but not quite recollection. “You are . . . someone?” Ever get it wrong? At worst, we are embarrassed, and we likely embarrassed someone else.

In our account from Acts, far more is at stake than embarrassment. Our Ethiopian friend is struggling with the second scroll of Isaiah. He is reading from what we now know as Isaiah 53. He has come across one of the clearest prophecies as Christ’s substitutionary suffering and death for the sins of the world. Christians have used this very section of Scripture in worship on Good Friday for centuries because it is directly talking about Christ. But our Ethiopian friend is at his own awkward moment of some recognition but not proper recollection—“Is it Isaiah or someone else?”

At just the right time in just the right place, God picked up and placed someone there for the Ethiopian man. God brought Philip alongside the man’s chariot so he could explain who someone else is. The someone else is Jesus. The One who is, who was, and is to come to bring good news. Jesus is the One who gave his life as the ransom for the many. He is the innocent, blameless One who bears the innumerable sins of the whole world. Jesus silently was slaughtered to pay the price for sin—once and for all. This someone, this One is the Savior.

What a beautiful account! It is easy to see the miracle of how God used Philip as a very important someone in the Ethiopian’s life.

Do we realize and appreciate the incredible miracle of our own faith? We all are born into this sinful world with a sinful heart so darkened we couldn’t possibly comprehend the truth. We live in a sinful world so out of context of understanding who God is and what he is like. So in miracles of wonder and grace, God sent in—to our lives at just the right time and place, someone. A parent, a spouse, a friend, a pastor, a teacher, who brought us to the font and taught us the word of God. The Holy Spirit worked through the Word shared by someone. Now we truly are someone—a child of God, forgiven and loved by the One.

God now uses us as someone in the lives of others. Sometimes this is easy and joyful. We pass on precious truths to the next generation telling them the good news. Sometimes it can be far more awkward or uncomfortable. The next generation gets older and more defiant. Dearly loved friends and family members drift away from church. How will they know unless someone invites, encourages, explains? May God continue to encourage us and use us as someone in their lives.

Prayer reflection: Give thanks to God for the many “someones” he has placed in our lives to bring us and keep us in the faith. Consider someone we know who needs to hear again of the only One saves. Pray for love and humility to welcome them home to hear the good news.