Pearl: Giving God priority in our lives.

Function: To recall worshippers back home to the home where God is clearly the focus of our lives, where God is Lord of our lives.

What is in your “closet of forgotten passions?” Max Lucado came up with that image, not me. But I do have one. In my “closet of forgotten passions” you will find:

1. A box containing tubes of oil paint because I often talk about painting on canvass some of the beautiful scenes that abound around here. There is one particular tree that I drive by every day which I have photographed and want to paint one day.
2. In that same closet are my fishing poles. That is a passion which I have kept in the closet of forgotten passions.
3. In one season I wanted to learn Spanish. My Aunt sent me a set of cassettes to use to do it. I listened to one. But did not continue.
4. You will also find the remaining pieces of trim, wallpaper, and tools which I need to add to the dollhouse that I built over 10 years ago but have not finished.
   a. Most of us have various things in our “closets of forgotten passions.” Not all of them are that important. It is not a big deal that I haven’t yet painted as I have felt the urge to do.
   b. However, if we have put our Lord in that closet of forgotten passions, then there is indeed a problem.

God deserves first place in our lives, all through our lives. It is a matter of keeping “first things first.” Beloved English theologian and writer of the 20th century C.S. Lewis wrote: “If we put first things first, we get the second things thrown in; but if we put second things first, we lose both the first and second things.”
Cyrus was the King of Persia. God put into the heart of Cyrus warmth for God’s people who were living in exile after being overrun and taken into slavery by the Babylonian empire and was now under his rule.

1. So Cyrus gave freedom to God’s people who were so moved to return to Jerusalem so that they could live there and rebuild the temple which had been left in ruins.
   a. This is interesting on at least two levels.
      i. God wanted to restore his relationship with his people. He wanted them to return to him in their homeland which he had given to them.
      ii. Foreign Kings and empires were hearing about the God of the Israelites/Judeans.

2. A good-sized group of the people of God was inspired to return to Jerusalem.
   a. 42, 360 people plus 7, 337 male and female slaves, 200 male and female singers, 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6, 720 donkeys.
   b. Around 537 BCE nearly 50,000 people headed back home to rebuild their lives in the land God gave to them.

3. The Lord’s chief concern for them was to immediately begin rebuilding the temple. This was because it would be a constant symbol and reminder to them to keep God first in their lives.

It is vital to the Lord now as it was then that we keep “first things first.” Keeping first things first for the follower of Christ is giving God first priority in our lives. It is certainly not keeping him in the “closet of forgotten passions.”

This 50,000 people returned with great joy and thanks and high goals to rebuild their homes in their homeland with their God. They moved back in and the work on the temple got started.

1. It didn’t take long for opposition to what the people were doing crept up.
2. So the people lost some of their passion for the project. As their attention to God and his temple drifted they turned their attention upon their own homes
and their own priorities. So work on the temple came to a standstill and there was a 16 year layoff from the project.

a. If you are learning anything from our journey through the Bible using The Story, what do you think God did about this loss of passion for his purposes? He stirred someone up with a prophetic message. In this case it was Haggai.

b. His message was powerful and amazing at how it speaks to us today even though it was proclaimed thousands of years ago to our spiritual ancestors: *Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.* We used those words in our “Prayer of Confession” today (Haggai 1:6).

**How often through our lives do we get inspired to return home—that is, to our God—and then drift away from him as our first priority?**

1. It is exciting how many people have asked me about EPIC. People are feeling a prompting to “return home to their God.” The signs that we have scattered around the community are making a difference. In part, they are serving as “calls for people to return home” to order their lives around God by returning to worship.

2. Through our lives we get inspired by a message or something we read or someone who urges us. We sometimes get inspired by things that happen to us—whether good or bad. Things often inspire us to return to the Lord. Often it is the birth of children which acts as a call for us to return home to God.

**Whatever it may be it is always the Lord calling us to return to him and to get about the work of his kingdom.**

1. Today, God urges us to order our lives around him. He has many houses of worship throughout the world. There are many throughout our own community.

2. He is most concerned for us to acknowledge him as head of our homes.
3. He wants it to be clearly obvious. This goes back to his concern for the nations to be drawn to him by his people. This is the way God works.
   a. For good or ill, we are God’s greatest advertisements.
4. Our calling is to build our lives around him. This is a day of many distractions. There are a million things to distract us and break our concentration from what really matters.

**Give God first place! He deserves first place in our lives. His place in our lives should be clearly evident to those around us.**

1. God’s concerns should be our concerns. His mission should be our biggest concern. Our Lord Jesus throughout his entire life was most concerned about “staying the course” of his Father’s mission.
2. What will it look like for you and me to return home?
   a. It may take a serious effort to do so.
   b. It may mean making some changes.
   c. It may mean doing some soul searching.
   d. Your recent trial or time of testing, or even suffering could be God’s way of calling you to return home.

**Jock, the painter, often would thin his paint so it would go further. So when a church decided to do some maintenance, Jock was able to put in the low bid, and got the job. As always, he thinned his paint way down with water.**

One day while he was up on the scaffolding—the job almost finished—he heard a horrendous clap of thunder, and the sky opened.

The downpour washed the thinned paint off the church and knocked Jock off his scaffolding and onto the lawn among the gravestones and puddles of thinned and worthless paint.

Jock knew this was a warning from God, so he got on his knees and cried: “Oh, God! Forgive me! What should I do?”

And from the thunder, a mighty voice: “REPAINT! REPAINT, AND THIN NO MORE!”
All joking aside, this is exactly what is required of us. Returning home is a matter of giving God first place in our lives. Returning home is a matter of making the work of the Kingdom the main work of our lives. Many of the things in our closets of forgotten passions are of no major consequence. Clearly, however, God and the concerns of his reign do not belong in our closets of forgotten passions!

Give God and his reign first place! Keep the main thing the main thing!