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Tower of Strength

**“The name of the Lord is a strong tower
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”**

—Proverbs 18:10

That Was Then, This is Now

A young friend of mine was recently awarded a cross country scholarship at a major university. I was very proud of him.

Nevertheless, I chided him, “I’m a better runner than you, and I’ll never let you forget it. Maybe they should give me the scholarship.”

“Huh?” came the puzzled reply.

“Well,” I reminded him, “last time we ran a 10K together, I beat you by more than a minute. In fact, you’ve never beaten me. Clearly, I’m a better runner than you are, and they should give the scholarship to me instead.”

“Oh yeah,” he replied with a smile.

You see, about six years ago, when I was at the top of my fitness, and he was just starting to get interested in running, we entered the same 10K race. I beat him. Frankly, he would have beaten me then, too, except that he suffered stomach cramps about halfway through and had to stop several times to throw up on the side of the course. Still, being more twenty years older than him, I relished an opportunity to remind him of my past victory.

Finally he shot back, *“Well, that was then, and this is now.”*

Never have truer words been spoken. Because if my friend and I had to race right now, his 10K finish would be under 35 minutes, and mine would be about 55 minutes. My friend could cross the finish line and have time to eat a leisurely snack, shower, shave, comb his hair, and dress up in a three-piece suit to attend the awards ceremony before I would even be in sight of the finish line.

Sure, one time, just one time, some six years ago, my finish was 48 minutes and his was 49. But that was then, and this is now. He is now slimmer, and stronger, and dedicated. I am now slower, older, fatter, and unmotivated. What a ridiculous thing for me to say, “I’m a better runner than you,” based on something that happened in ancient history. That was then, this is now.

God gave His prophet Ezekiel a similar message to declare to the people regarding not our athletic conditions, but our spiritual conditions. The message is recorded in Ezekiel 33:11–16,

Say to them, “As I live!” declares the Lord God, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?”

And you, son of man, say to your fellow citizens, “The righteousness of a righteous man will not deliver him in the day of his transgression, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he will not stumble because of it in the day when he turns from his wickedness; whereas a righteous man will not be able to live by his righteousness on the day when he commits sin.

“When I say to the righteous he will surely live, and he so trusts in his righteousness that he commits iniquity, none of his righteous deeds will be remembered; but in that same iniquity of his which he has committed he will die.

“But when I say to the wicked, ‘You will surely die,’ and he turns from his sin and practices justice and righteousness; if a wicked man restores a pledge, pays back what he has taken by robbery, walks by the statutes which ensure life without

committing iniquity, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of his sins that he has committed will be remembered against him. He has practiced justice and righteousness; he shall surely live.”

Can't we not also grasp the ridiculousness of basing our relationship with God on a one-time event years or even decades ago? But that doesn't stop many of us from trying it.

We think back fondly to our conversion, when we, in an outburst of sincere faith, confessed our loyalty to Jesus and pledged our lives to Him—but haven't lifted a finger in His service since.

Or we think back to a moment of great sacrifice when we, as a young family, made a difficult decision to put God first, maybe in terms of a career choice, or a financial contribution, or church choice—but have been coasting spiritually since then.

Or we think back to the many years we taught in Bible classes, or preached sermons, or led prayers—but recently we've been more of a pewsitter than a helper to the Lord's work.

Or we use twenty years of scrupulously avoiding sin to provide an excuse for a week or two of wicked indulgence, to feel like we have earned the latitude for our little mid-life crisis.

Folks, that was then, this is now! What was done in the past is done. And while God “is not so unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward his name” (Heb. 6:10), He demands that we do not rest on our laurels, but instead “show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end” (6:11).

We are to think of life as a marathon rather than a 100 meter dash, to “run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Heb. 12:1). That word “endurance” in Greek is *hupo-meno*, which by the roots means “to remain under a load.” Vine's Dictionary says, “to abide under, to bear up courageously.” Thus, the Christian walk, while full of joy and amazing experiences and wonderful blessings, also has its share of work involved, and periods of difficulty or discouragement. We will need to tap into our reserves of spiritual strength during those times, to endure faithfully from now until the end.

God praised the Ephesian Christians for their past deeds and toil and wisdom, but warned them,

You have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the deeds you did at first, or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent! (Rev. 2:4–5).

The time frame that we have to work with is not the past, but the present. “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). Ezekiel reveals the amazing grace of God, that He will ignore the sins and failures of the past, so that we may repent and be saved in the present. But the same thing is true the other way, too. Salvation is based on where we are today, not years ago.

It may be that ten years ago our faith was strong. That was then, this is now. It may be that fifteen years ago we gave until it hurt. That was then, this is now. It may be that twenty years ago we were an active member of a congregation. That was then, this is now.

Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. “For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him” [Habakkuk 2:3–4]. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul (Heb. 10:35–39).

Our eternal destiny is based not on the Christian we once were before, but the Christian we are today. Let’s stay busy! —*John Guzzetta*

Quote of the Week:

“When you cease to make a contribution you begin to die.”

—*Eleanor Roosevelt*