

Life: Call others to step forward

June 29, 2015

• *The Bible Studies for Life* lesson for July 12 focuses on Joshua 24:14-18, 24-26.

The origin of the phrase “draw a line in the sand” is uncertain. For most Texans, however, those words recall the Battle of the Alamo in 1836. Tradition says Commander William B. Travis drew a line on the ground and asked any man willing to fight to step over. Stepping over the line, therefore, connotes for us a decisive action from which there is no turning back.

Joshua draws the line

After the Reubenites and Gadites returned home to Gilead, east of the Jordan River, the Israelites experienced 25 years of peace in the Promised Land. Joshua, who likely was 110 years old, began to prepare his people for a transition in leadership after his death. He wanted to impress upon them the importance of continuing to follow Jehovah God instead of regressing to worship the false gods of their ancestors or bowing to the idols of the pagan tribes around them. Although Scripture does not indicate Joshua drew an actual line in the dirt, he did challenge the people: “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the god of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15).

Joshua’s ultimatum offered no middle ground. He urged the people to declare whom they would serve—the one true God or false idols. Joshua’s strong leadership of the Israelites, and his example as a servant of God, inspired the people to respond with passion they would follow Jehovah God:

“Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods. ... We will serve the Lord our God and obey him’” (Joshua 24:16, 24). Then, Joshua reviewed God’s covenant with his people and recorded their declaration to worship God only. He set a large stone under an oak tree as a reminder of this sacred occasion.

Those familiar with Old Testament history know the Israelites’ promise was short-lived. After Joshua and his generation died, the next generation of Israelites “knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel” (Judges 2:10). As a result, the Israelites “did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshipped various gods of the peoples around them” (Judges 2:11, 12). Subsequently, beginning with the period of the judges, Israel was characterized by a cycle of idol worship, repentance, worshipping God and then returning to idol worship. Their good intentions were not strong enough to overcome the pull of evil around them.

Like the children of Israel, our best intentions to follow God are unsuccessful when we depend on our own dismal human ability to follow the rules. Thankfully, the Messiah, Jesus, ushered in a new covenant based on grace: “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known. ... This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:21, 22). As followers of Christ, our righteousness is a gift to us instead something we strive to earn by our futile efforts to follow the rules. The Spirit puts God’s commands in our hearts and writes them on our minds. He gives us the strength we need to obey them (Hebrews 10:16).

Whom will you serve?

Christian leaders can follow Joshua’s example by following God wholeheartedly while exhorting others to do the same. Jesus said “No one

who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). Wistfully looking back to our old ways of life or allowing spiritual inertia to creep into our lives not only weakens our leadership, but also is repulsive to God. In Revelation 3:15, for example, Jesus chastised the church in Laodicea for their complacency: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!

So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” These words remind me of Joshua’s: “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). As the Holy Spirit draws people, they can accept or reject Christ. Joshua-like leaders, following the direction of the Spirit, will urge others to cross the line of complete surrender to God.