

THE CHALLENGE OF KNOWING WHEN TO EVACUATE

By Jim Mathis

It is hard not to be moved emotionally when hearing and seeing reports of catastrophic flooding, whether it be on the Texas Gulf coast or Florida in the United States, as we have seen in recent months, in Italy, Indonesia, or India. Images we see of homes destroyed and families torn apart by devastation leave us feeling sad and helpless.

After Hurricane Harvey struck the low-lying region of Houston, Texas, I talked with a friend living there who said he and his family were dry, but the property their house was sitting on had turned into an island. They were surrounded by feet of water. When disasters like these occur, I wonder about my response, as well as what my level of preparedness would be for myself and family, should a similar calamity occur in our area. At what point does a person determine to stay and persevere, and when do they make the decision to evacuate and seek safety elsewhere?

This question is both practical and metaphorical. It can apply to natural calamities, or the adversities we encounter in everyday life and work. Our society puts emphasis on perseverance, of being steadfast and strong in the face of disaster. However, there is not a lot of talk about recognizing when to flee, close a business, or evacuate the area.

One definition of wisdom borrows from the old card-playing adage: "Know when to hold them, and know when to fold them." In other words, when to keep playing – and when to quit. The history of business is littered with the names of companies that held onto a losing hand too long. Eastman Kodak, Montgomery Ward department stores and Borders Books are just a few. All stood firm, clinging to their cultures and practices, even as the tides of change arose around them. Eventually they succumbed to this "flood."

Whether we are leading a company, or trying to build a successful career, we should take such high-profile failures as warnings. In the face of a severe storm, whether natural threats – hurricanes, tornados, floods, or forest fires – or metaphorical ones such as a job that is not working out, an unprofitable product line, or living in an economically depressed area, do we know the trigger point? Are we able to recognize when we should decide, "It is time to go. I cannot wait any longer. I am out of here"?

Knowing when to act in a way that leads to the best outcome is a sign of wisdom. Here are principles from the Bible on how to find the necessary wisdom:

Know where to put your confidence. Sometimes a storm is a test to reveal where your trust is – in your own ability, or in God. He can guide us through adversities that we think are insurmountable. *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight"* (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Do not fear trying something new. The Scriptures offer numerous accounts of people who were led by God to leave their comfort zones and do drastically new things. Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Ruth and Daniel are just some of the Old Testament examples. *"Do not call to mind the former things, or ponder things of the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland"* (Isaiah 43:18-19).

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Are you facing any “storms” in your life today, whether in relation to your work, or perhaps something in your personal life? How are you dealing with it?
2. Have you encountered times when you struggled with whether to persevere and work through a complex dilemma or to “evacuate,” realizing that to remain would leave your future in jeopardy? Explain how you addressed the situation – and what was the outcome.
3. Reading business reports, almost every day we see examples of companies trying to survive in a continually changing marketplace. What can we learn from the failures of once-highly successful enterprises like Eastman Kodak, Montgomery Ward, or others?
4. What is your first reaction when you confront adversity, when an unexpected “storm” arises? Where are you placing your trust? And do you find the idea of leaving and trying a new thing too intimidating to consider? Explain your answer.

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Psalm 37:4-5; Ecclesiastes 1:9-10; Isaiah 41:10; Mark 2:21-22; 1 Peter 4:12