Building a Bridge of Faith over Troubled Water

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Let me start by saying that there are quite a few instances of water being mentioned in the Bible. Water can be a place of chaos, a context of trust, a means of blessing.

Water as a place of chaos is there from the first page of the Bible, the creation story of Genesis 1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . . darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light.’”

It is always God’s plan to redeem the chaos and bring blessing. When Jesus talks with the woman at the well, it is to explain to her that he is the water of life, that whoever drinks of his water will never thirst. Our salvation through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is the ultimate display of how God is always working to bring blessing out of chaos. It is the very heart of God: to redeem and restore.

But very often God calls us to wait on him, and to trust. Often we have to experience the chaos without any knowledge of whether the blessing will come, or when. And very often we are also part of the redemptive purposes of God. God uses us to help bring restoration to the lives of those around us.

When the disciples and Jesus were in the boat, and a storm whipped up, and the disciples were afraid—they had to trust that Jesus would act. And Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. (Mark 4:39)

In the exodus story, when the Israelites first escaped from slavery, they came to the chaos of the Red Sea. They thought their bid

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for freedom was over. But the Red Sea parted and the Israelites were able to cross safely (Exod. 14).

Chapter 1 of the book of Joshua tells of Joshua’s calling to be leader. After Moses had died, Joshua had to take the Israelites across the River Jordan in order for them to travel toward the land that God had promised to their ancestors.

So as we focus in on water as a setting for trust and look at the story of Joshua, my question for us is this: What is God asking us to trust him with? What is our River Jordan that God asks us to travel through in order that we would reach a place of blessing?

The Story of Bawili

As Toilet Twinning CEO, it is my privilege to travel to some of the poorest places on earth. This is the story of a woman I met in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): her story shows how she has trusted God to take her and her family from a place of chaos to a place of blessing.

Bawili is a mother and a grandmother. Her husband was shot dead during the civil war insurgency in the 1990s, and Bawili fled with her remaining family to Tanzania, where they lived as refugees for about ten years until 2008. When the Tanzanian refugee camp was closed down, they were sent to a province in eastern Congo to start again. They had nothing, and there was nothing for them in Mwandiga village: no water, no sanitation, no livelihood.

They could only afford one jerry can, so Bawili’s teenage daughter Ebinda would make three journeys a day to the lake for water. It was a ninety-minute round trip. Each journey put her at risk of being attacked. Each jerry can of dirty lake water put the family’s health at risk.

A few months after they settled in Mwandiga, Ebinda was bitten by a snake as she went to the toilet in the bush, and a few months after that, Ebinda was attacked by a group of men as she went to the toilet. She became pregnant and left school as a result. Her son is now six. She told us that she hasn’t experienced a single day since the attack when she has felt truly happy.

That is a story of chaos.

In those ten years as refugees in Tanzania, and in those years of living in Mwandiga village without clean water and without a toilet,
Bawili must have felt pretty hopeless. She must have wondered if God was hearing her prayers, and surely must have thought, “Why me?” “Why was my husband shot dead?” She must have wondered if life was ever going to get any better, and desperately longed for a day when her family was safe, healthy, and prosperous.

But this isn’t just about chaos. What I love is that this story is also about trust, and about blessing.

In 2012, the answer to Bawili’s prayers came with a program that Toilet Twinning helped fund. The program built a borehole to give the community fresh water, and a community health club was set up in the village to teach the village residents about sanitation and health. When I met Bawili, and spent a few days with her, she told me that she was among the first to join the club. She never missed a meeting; she always arrived first and was last to leave.

When the group voted in their first president, Bawili was the obvious choice. She encouraged villagers to build their own toilets, one by one, even though she wasn’t able to build one herself. “Don’t look at me,” she would say, “I can’t afford a toilet but you must do this for your family’s health and safety.” And so the group voted unanimously to build Bawili a toilet. Eighteen months ago, members gathered materials and dug it together. Bawili brought the water each day and helped make the bricks. Bawili says, “If you do not have love, you cannot build a good society.” Bawili has experienced the love of a community reaching out to her. Now her toilet is her pride and joy. She says,

My toilet brings us freedom, privacy and dignity as a family. We used to feel shame when we had people visit us and we didn’t have a toilet for them to use. I could never invite people over for a meal because we didn’t have a toilet for them to use. People would shout abuse at us as we walked to the bush. I am so thankful and so happy to have a toilet.

Bawili’s toilet is a symbol of what’s possible when people reach out in love. Bawili’s toilet is also a symbol of the fact that Bawili never gave up. It looked hopeless, and Bawili didn’t know how or when a toilet would be part of her life and make her family safe. But eighteen months ago, it happened, and Bawili’s trusting and hoping came to fruition.
God says to Joshua (Josh. 1:2–3), “You and the people, get ready. I am about to give you every place you set your foot, as I promised Moses.”

God’s promises didn’t live and die with Moses. God’s bigger than death. We see that in the resurrection of Jesus.

The plans of God will always prevail. And with Joshua 1, God’s plans are about to prevail because God is raising up Joshua to take on the baton. And if Joshua had refused—because we all have a choice in this great adventure of faith—then God would have raised up someone else. But God started with Joshua and cast a vision and said to Joshua, “Trust me, follow me, get ready. Three days from now you’re going to cross the River Jordan and take possession of the land that the Lord is giving you to own.”

What does it mean to get ready and to be ready? We have to be aligned to God. We have to be in step with God and listen to God. Imagine if you heard God saying to you, “No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. . . . I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous” (Josh. 1:5–6).

We need to be aligned with one another. In the New Testament, we are called to “one another” values: love one another; accept one another; be at peace with one another; bear with one another; seek good for one another. As Bawili says, if you don’t have love, you can’t have a good society. God’s redemptive and restorative purposes are in us, building a community where love is at the center.

As Toilet Twinning CEO, I have had times when I have been stretched to the ends of myself and I have had nothing left to give. Toilet Twinning has grown enormously in the past five years. We raised around £200,000 a year five years ago, and we now raise around £1.5 million a year. And we need to raise a lot more each year if we are going to make a bigger dent in the appalling statistic that 2.3 billion people in the world don’t have a toilet. They are the Bawilis of this world. Growing Toilet Twinning has been very hard at times: knowing the best thing to do, in terms of where we fundraise, how we fundraise, and how we build an infrastructure that can send out up to three hundred toilet twins a day during our busiest periods. The growth would have been overwhelming if I hadn’t been aligned to God and trusted that God was with me. Toilet Twinning is a story of my relationship with God, but also of my relationship with those around me, and the fantastic team that I have the privilege to work with every day.
If we consider Ephesians 6, part of being ready to go where God calls us is about being clothed for this battle in the armor of God. As we read in verses 14–15, “Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.”

We cannot just sit in prayer meeting after prayer meeting, Bible study after Bible study. We have to run the race, do the things God calls us to do, with feet that are wearing sandals of peace. How are you and I being called to shine for Christ in this dark world? What are you and I doing to be a bringer of peace, to reveal to people Jehovah Shalom, the God of Peace?

A year after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, I was walking the streets of the capital, looking at the chaos and suffering of people’s lives in the devastation of the earthquake, and the work of NGOs seemed so small in comparison to the chaos and poverty. God reminded me that we sow not into this life, but into the things of eternity.

Second Corinthians 4:18 says, “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

When I’m in DRC with Bawili, when I’m in Haiti after an earthquake, when I am at the Toilet Twinning office answering e-mails and having catch-ups, creating annual strategies and plans, I am praying that I am aligned with God and that God’s eternal plans and purposes are being outworked.

I don’t know what worries you today, but I suspect quite a few of you today have challenges, whether it’s with your children, your spouse, your parents, your workplace, your health. It’s why God’s words are so important for us: Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged. For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

This is the thing Joshua most needed to hear, and it is what we most need to hear. We have a job to do. We are kingdom people, living for the things of eternity. And in that endeavor, we have to be strong and courageous in order to run the race well, and finish it well.

Bawili has so much to teach us on this front. She moved from chaos to blessing, but she didn’t just take that blessing for herself. As president of the community health club, she made it her mission to encourage as many people as possible in her village to build toilets...
and to learn about hygiene. Bawili is using the little she has to sow into the building of a community that is built on love.

So, please let me end with God’s impartation to Joshua, and may God’s words go deep into our hearts, and minds, and souls: “Be strong. Be courageous. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged. For I will be with you, wherever you go.”