

From Rock Star to Rock Bottom: How the Holy Spirit Gave This Man a Supernatural 'Thirst'

Scott Harrison is the founder and CEO of charity: water, a nonprofit organization bringing clean and safe drinking water to people in developing countries.

The largest water nonprofit in the United States, charity: water has funded more than 28,300 water projects for 8.2 million people in 26 countries. It has been name-checked by President Barack Obama; garnered support from the founders of Facebook, Twitter, and Spotify; and Bill Gates has called charity: water an “innovative and transparent organization making a huge impact.”

Harrison has been recognized on *Fortune's* 40 Under 40 list, *Forbes's* Impact 30 list, and *Fast Company's* 100 Most Creative People in Business. In the last 12 years, charity: water originated a social fundraising website model and raised over \$300 million from more than 1 million donors. With more than 2 million social media followers combined, charity: water channels 100 percent of all public donations toward water project costs. And yet, as Harrison describes with great vulnerability in *Thirst*, his life easily could have gone a different way.

His book, *Thirst*, hits shelves today. One hundred percent of the author's net proceeds from the book will go to fund charity: water projects around the world!

Harrison spoke with Charisma News recently about how the Holy Spirit intervened in his life.

Tell me about the moment you hit rock bottom and knew you had to change?

When I was 19 years old, I moved to New York City to rebel against a conservative Christian upbringing. I grew up an only child, helping to take care of an invalid mother who had been poisoned by carbon monoxide, and wanted to explore life without rules or boundaries. I discovered that there was a job in New York City where you could get paid to drink alcohol if you could get the right people to the right parties—it was called a nightclub promoter. I spent the next decade climbing nightlife's social ladder, working at more than 40 clubs over that time. I developed a serious drinking problem, a cocaine habit, pornography and gambling addictions, and a severe cough from smoking 2-3 packs of Marlboro Reds a day.

During a New Year's Eve vacation to South America in 2004, I had a crisis of conscience and a moment of clarity. We were surrounded by beautiful people, servants and horses in a luxurious compound with more champagne than we could ever drink. During that trip, I realized that there would never be enough. Even though I drove a nice car, had an expensive watch and a model girlfriend, I had become the worst person I knew.

I was emotionally and spiritually bankrupt. I lived only for myself. I was leaving a destructive legacy of brokenness and debauchery in my wake. I began to pray again, asking God what the opposite of my life might look like. What would it mean to return to the faith and morality I'd rejected? To live a life that I could be proud of—one that pursued virtue instead of vice? When I got back to New York after that trip, I quit my job and began applying to volunteer for humanitarian missions around the world. After multiple rejections (unsurprisingly, none of the upstanding organizations I applied to wanted a hard-partying guy from NYC like me), I was offered the chance to volunteer as a photojournalist aboard a hospital ship through Mercy Ships, provided I pay about \$500 a month along the way. That took me to West Africa, where I spent almost two

years documenting the incredible work their medical staff was doing to dramatically improve people's lives. It was there that I first encountered the water crisis and saw children drinking dirty water.

I'd never seen poverty like that up close and was horrified to witness human beings drinking from leech and bacteria-infested pond water that they shared with animals. I came back deeply changed and began a mission to help bring clean and safe drinking water to everyone on the planet.

How did growing up in a Christian family affect your career path?

I was brought up in a very conservative Christian home. Despite my mother's illness from the carbon monoxide leak, my parents had a deep and authentic faith that I now look back upon with much respect and admiration. They tried to build my character and implement rules that would keep me out of trouble and prevent me from falling in with the wrong crowd. But in high school, I joined a rock band, and as we toured, I became exposed to more and more of the things that I'd never been allowed to do. Suddenly, the rules seemed like they were there to just keep me from having fun. From exploring the world, and discovering who I was.

It took me another 10 years to come full circle, back to that faith and to those values. Back to a life that pursued virtue over vice.

How did you take the faith of your parents and make it your own?

Throughout my decade of rebellion, my parents never gave up on me. They prayed constantly, and enlisted the help of people in their church and community to pray for me. When I began to rediscover that lost faith as an adult, I saw Jesus in a new light. I saw him as a rebel, as someone who challenged the religious establishment of the day, calling for extreme

righteousness, demanding justice for the poor. James 1:27 was a foundational verse for me during that time. "Pure religion is this. Look after widows and orphans in their distress, and keep yourself from being polluted by the world." At the time, I was 0 for 2. Not only had I done nothing for the poor in a decade, I was a purveyor of pollution.

But watching a countercultural Jesus live this out so fully intrigued me, it set me on a new path, and I became determined to try to follow in His footsteps. Although charity: water has never been a religious organization, I've always done my best to live out those values in my leadership. And do my best to make sure that integrity, kindness, respect, compassion and humility are essential ingredients in the way charity: water operates.

What sort of prophetic words have inspired you? So many people have encouraged me and spoken life into our work over the years, it's almost impossible to pick one. When I first started charity: water, I remember traveling through Prague. A new friend told me that I would be able to take all my past knowledge from nightlife of how to throw parties and throw meaningful celebrations for the good of humanity. Years later, our annual fundraisers and events have raised tens of millions of dollars for clean water.

What Scriptures do you meditate on? I previously mentioned James 1:27—one of my favorites. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." In fact, I love the whole book of James. It's practical and incredibly challenging. I also love Peter 3:15: "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." I've always found the idea of sharing the hope that I have both gently and respectfully very compelling. And now, with two children under four at home, the

“Shepherd’s psalm” is one of our favorites at night. I think we could do with fearing less evil these days.

Why water? Dirty water steals time and it kills. In Africa alone, 40 billion hours are wasted each year collecting water. Not only does walking for water keep children out of school and prevent their parents from working to earn money, bad water and a lack of sanitation and hygiene contributes to up to half the disease throughout the developing world. Few people realize that dirty water is responsible for more death than all forms of violence, including war. That’s a frightening statistic, particularly for the 663 million people around the world—twice the population of the United States or 1 out of every 10 people alive—that live without access to clean water. That’s the mission of charity: water.

In the past 12 years, thanks to the generosity of more than 1 million donors worldwide, charity: water has raised over \$300 million to bring clean water to over 8.2 million people across 26 countries. Though 8 million may seem small compared to 663 million, when you think about how clean water can change the trajectory of each individual’s life, the impact is profound. Access to clean water is a life-changing gift of opportunity: It offers recipients a chance at a healthy life. It gives people the time needed to pursue an education or a career, which in turn empowers entire communities to begin breaking the cycle of poverty. Water is life. Today, I believe even more strongly in the transformative power of clean water than when I first started. And we’ll continue fighting to see a day where everyone on earth has access to it.

How have you grown as a businessman and entrepreneur?

That’s something I’ve had the opportunity to recently reflect on writing my first book, *Thirst* (available for pre-sale at , and hits shelves Oct. 2, 2018). I’ve grown in many ways since founding charity: water, both professionally as a CEO and social entrepreneur, but also personally as a husband to my

wonderful wife, Viktoria, and a father to my son, Jackson (4), and my daughter, Emma (2). And as I share in the book, I made a ton of stupid mistakes along the way, and hope others might learn from them. Leading and scaling a global organization in uncertain times has been incredibly difficult but also incredibly rewarding. charity: water has come a long way since the early days when it seemed like we were always running out of money.

This year, thanks to an amazing community of generous givers around the world, we'll raise more than \$55 million and help 1.4 million new people get clean water for the first time in their lives. We continue to encourage bold, outside-the-box thinking and try to use technology in new and exciting ways. We've been early adopters of everything—from new social media platforms to VR to cryptocurrency. This year, we're incredibly excited about The Spring, our monthly giving community where people from 94 countries (and counting!) donate every single month in support of clean water for others, knowing that 100 percent of the money they give directly impacts people's lives.

What role does faith play in your platform? While charity: water is and always will be a non-religious organization, I get to live out my personal faith and values through my work every day. When I think of heaven—and I know there are many views on what that may or may not be like—I believe for certain that no mother is weeping, holding a child in her arms who just died from a waterborne disease.

No children are walking five hours a day in the hot sun, breaking their backs as they carry 40 pounds of dirty water that could literally kill them. Dirty water doesn't exist. And one of the great joys of the work has been involving a community of people in this work that don't share my beliefs. I have always believed strongly that you certainly don't need to do what I do on a Sunday to work for, volunteer at or contribute to charity: water. In fact, our single largest

donor—a donor who has contributed more than \$15 million to the organization—is a proud atheist. Clean water is something everyone can believe in. It's been a unifying force—bringing people who might disagree religiously or politically together to fight for the good of others.

If you could give one piece of advice to Christians, what would you tell them?

To me, integrity and generosity are some of the most important Christian values to live by, and they inform the work that I do every single day. I believe in the transformative power of radical generosity. When we step outside of ourselves, and use our time, talent and money to serve others, it changes us for the better. It frees us. Over the past 11 years with charity: water, I've seen the practice of giving bring joy to so many people, including my own family. As for integrity, I believe that much more important than what you do is how you do it. For charity: water, that's meant making hard decisions that hurt in the short term. It's meant not taking the easy way out, and even publicly admitting when we fell short. But it also means we've been able to create a culture that we're proud of.

Click [here](#) to find out more about *Thirst*.