



Illia's Path

A letter from Illia, age 14 — a story of faith, family, responsibility, and a one week camp that means so much more.

A Village, a Family, a Heavy Load

Illia is 14 years old. He lives in a village with his mom, his brother Andrii (13), and his other two younger siblings. Their father works abroad — and for a long time, things were stable. But just before camp last year, the family received difficult news: their father had started drinking again.

"We worry about him a lot," Illia writes. "We pray for him every day." These are not the words of a child untouched by hardship. These are the words of a young man who has already learned what it means to carry something heavy in his heart — and still choose to bring it to God.

Life in their village is not easy. The boys take on chores at home, shoulder real responsibilities, and do their best to support their mom. "There are three boys in the house," Illia explains, "and we understand that we need to contribute in every way." That kind of awareness — that quiet, earnest sense of duty — speaks volumes about who Illia already is at fourteen.



Seven Kilometers to School, Every Sunday to Church

School is seven kilometers from home. Often, there is no ride — so Illia and Andrii walk. Seven kilometers there, seven kilometers back. This is not a detail meant to inspire pity. It is simply what their life looks like, and Illia shares it matter-of-factly, the way someone does when they have accepted a reality and chosen not to be defined by it.

And despite the distance, despite the chores, despite the worry sitting quietly in the background of every day — they go to church every Sunday. That is where they first heard about the camp. That one faithful act of showing up, week after week, opened a door that would change everything for Illia.

There is something profoundly moving about a family like this. A mom holding things together. Two teenage boys deciding, without being told, to be part of the solution. A faith that doesn't wait for perfect circumstances — it just keeps walking, even when the road is long.

The Moment Everything Changed

Two summers ago, at camp, Illia's journey with God began in a real and personal way. He repented. He asked God to come into his life. And something happened — something he describes with quiet certainty: *"God accepted me."*

My journey with God began two summers ago, when I repented at camp and asked God to come into my life. It was a special moment — God accepted me. — Illia

Three words. Simple, direct, and full of weight: God accepted me. For a boy whose father is absent, whose family is stretched, whose daily life asks a great deal of him — to know that he is fully accepted, fully seen, fully welcomed by God is not a small thing. It is everything.

That moment at camp was the beginning. But beginnings, as Illia honestly shares, are not always followed by easy seasons. What came next was real life — with all its complexities.




After Camp: Temptations, Doubts, and Disappointments

Illia doesn't dress up his story to make it sound tidier than it is. After last year's camp, he writes, "it wasn't easy. There were temptations, doubts, and disappointments." He doesn't explain exactly what those looked like — and he doesn't need to. Any young person who has ever walked away from a powerful spiritual experience and then returned to ordinary life knows exactly what he means.

The glow fades. The routines return. The hard things are still hard. The questions don't go away just because you've had a mountaintop moment. And for Illia, the ordinary life he returned to included a father whose struggles were a source of real grief, a household that needed him, and a long road to school that didn't get shorter just because God was now part of his story.

This is the part of the testimony that often goes untold. But Illia tells it — and in doing so, he models something rare and beautiful: honest faith. Not faith that pretends everything is fine, but faith that admits the struggle and keeps going anyway.

 "Yet at every new camp, God touches me again and again." — Even after hard seasons, Illia keeps coming back. And God keeps meeting him there.

"The Path" — A Theme That Spoke Directly to Him



Choices

At camp, campers explored what it means to make decisions that honor God — especially when the easier path pulls in the other direction.



Trusting God

The camp centered on what real trust looks like — not the absence of fear, but the choice to move forward with God even in uncertainty.



God's Guidance

Illia and his fellow campers were reminded that God's guidance doesn't disappear when life gets hard — it is most present precisely in those moments.

Last year's camp theme was "The Path," and for Illia, it wasn't just a theme — it was a direct answer to the questions his life had been asking. Choices, trust, and divine guidance in hard seasons: these are not abstract concepts for a boy walking seven kilometers to school, praying for a struggling father, and trying to be the person his family needs him to be. These are the contours of his actual life.

What Camp Said to His Heart

Living in a simple village home, without my dad nearby, and carrying so much responsibility is not easy. But here, I was reminded once again that I am not alone. — Illia

These may be the most important words in Illia's entire letter. Not because they are the most dramatic — but because they name the deepest need. **Not to be alone.** For a teenage boy whose father is across a border and struggling with addiction, whose mother is doing her best but is surely stretched thin, whose daily life involves real adult responsibility — the experience of genuine community, of adults who show up, of a week where someone asks how he is and truly means it, is irreplaceable.

Camp did not fix Illia's circumstances. His father is still away. The road to school is still seven kilometers. The chores are still waiting. But something was restored in him — a sense of accompaniment, of not having to carry it all alone. And that, for young people in hard places, is often the very thing that makes everything else possible.

This is why HART camps exist. Not to offer escape from real life, but to offer the kind of encounter with God and community that gives young people the strength to return to real life and keep going — with hope, with faith, and with the knowledge that they are seen and loved.

One Week That Is So Much More

"For some, it's just one week of summer," Illia writes. "But for me, it is so much more." It is worth sitting with that sentence for a moment. The simplicity of it. The gratitude in it. And the implicit truth it holds for every person who has ever wondered whether what they give — their time, their money, their prayers, their planning — actually matters.

It matters. Illia is the proof.

For a sponsor

It may be a donation made quietly, without knowing the name of the child it reaches.

For a camp leader

It may be one more summer of early mornings and late nights and poured-out energy.

For Illia

It is the place where God meets him. Again and again. Where he is not alone. Where the path becomes clear.

The camps that shape Illia's story are made possible by people who will never meet him, who will never walk the road he walks, but who choose — year after year — to make room for a week that is so much more than a week.

A Prayer for Illia's Family

As you read Illia's letter, you may feel, as we do, a deep desire to hold his family in prayer. Here are the specific things Illia and his family need — offered not as a list to rush through, but as an invitation to slow down and intercede with care.

For Illia's father

That God would reach him in the grip of addiction — with grace, with truth, and with the kind of love that breaks chains. That his family's daily prayers would be answered in a way they can see and hold on to.

For Illia's mother

That she would feel the strength of God underneath her — and the support of her community around her. That the weight she carries would not crush her, but be shared.

For Illia and Andrii

That their faith would deepen and hold. That the responsibility they carry would build character without stealing their childhood. That they would always know they are not alone.

For all the Illias

For every child in a village, carrying more than they should have to, who finds their way to a camp pew and hears — perhaps for the very first time — that God has a path for them too.

You Make This Possible

Illia's letter ends with gratitude. Ours ends with an invitation. The camps that reached Illia — that gave him a place to repent, to encounter God, to be reminded he is not alone — are made possible by people like you. Youth ministry leaders who pour themselves out. Sponsors who give sacrificially. Volunteers who show up tired and serve anyway.

Every gift, every prayer, every hour of planning is part of a path that winds its way into a fourteen-year-old boy's heart in a Ukrainian village. You may never know his name. But he knows — with quiet, grateful certainty — that people cared enough to make space for him. And that changes everything.

I am very grateful to everyone who makes these camps possible. For some, it's just one week of summer. But for me, it is so much more. — Illia

Pray

For Illia, his family, and every young person whose path leads to one of these camps.

Give

Your generosity sponsors a week that is so much more than a week for young people who need it most.

Share

Pass this letter on. Let others know what their support makes possible — in villages, in hearts, on paths.

Thank you for walking this path with us.

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