Dear Jesus, Am I broken enough yet?

At youth group and church camp, I learned to perform my own unworthiness. It took years to recognize the spiritual harm this caused.

by McKenzie Watson-Fore in the July 2025 issue
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Illustration by Martha Park

I was six years old when I officially became a Christian. Mom sat with me on the cornflower-blue couch in the living room and led me in a simple prayer: We asked Jesus to forgive my sins and come live inside my heart.

I wish I could recall it well enough to know if I felt cleansed, seized, or, as John Wesley once put it, “strangely warmed.” I wish I could recall if I felt anything at all.

I was a prepubescent scrap of a girl—nine years old—the first time I went to camp on the shores of Milford Lake in Kansas, a lake edged by sycamores, scrub grass, and cicadas. That opalescent oasis quickly became my favorite place on earth. Jesus made sense there. Milford Lake became my personal Sea of Galilee—the place where God’s spirit chose to dwell. I spent camp swollen with wonder, hoping that nothing would ever puncture that feeling.

The summer before ninth grade, the camp theme was “lost”—as in, *We’re all lost without Jesus*, but the TV show *Lost* was also big right then, so it doubled as a pop-culture touchpoint. One morning, Pastor Brennan—the bearded father figure in charge—asked us to remember a time when we’d felt lost. Then he sent us off with our Bibles, journals, and pens to reflect.

The structure was always the same: daily devotionals would deepen our awareness of how badly we needed Jesus, and at the end of the week we would be given a chance to accept Christ. We needed to understand that we were lost before we could be found. This wasn’t just the arc of the week at camp; it was our entire evangelical framework. First you recognized your sin. Then you could be redeemed.

But something inside me—my sinful nature?—resisted this framework. I sat in the scrubby grass and propped the spiral-bound camp booklet on my knees. What if I didn’t meet the prerequisite for redemption? My loopy cursive slanted across the page. “There have been many times when I was lost,” I lied. The sky loomed over me like a slab of azure-tinted cement. Pastor Brennan had shifted the onus onto each of us to identify an experience that would complete the metaphor of salvation, but I wasn’t sure I could.

Thursday night, the penultimate evening, was come-to-Jesus time: Cry Night. More than a talk, it was a whole pageant of salvation, a cathartic performance of redemption and renewal in which we were all expected to take part. The idea was that we campers would be so moved by the demonstration of God’s love that we

would give our lives to him anew. We would be “receptive to the talk”: the emotional intensity of the night would prick our hearts with guilt, and we would turn ourselves over to God, hostages to our need for forgiveness. We would be emotionally bludgeoned into transformation.

“Go out under the stars,” Pastor Brennan directed. “We’ll make a bonfire. Whatever sins you’ve been struggling with, write them down, and you can toss them into the blaze.”

Campers drifted out into the night. Scattered across the prickly hill, kids were giving and re-giving their lives to Jesus. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t give my life to Jesus if he already had it—right?

I generally felt pretty close to God, and I almost never felt closer than when I was at camp. But right then, looking down over my peers in the throes of spiritual renewal, I didn’t feel close to God at all. I huddled in the parched grasses and wrapped my arms around my knees, trying to stay warm. Students down near the shelter were crying and praying with counselors: a chasm of flame and shadow, weeping and gnashing of teeth. Anxiety rose like an anthill in my stomach. If I couldn’t bring myself to confess before God, did that mean I was estranged from him? Had I been deluded about my spiritual status my whole life?

Two contradictory voices launched an argument inside my mind. What did I have to confess? If I followed the prescribed steps—scribbling a sin on the scrap of paper, surrendering it to the flames, crying until I felt myself purified and renewed—just for the sake of performing the choreography, wasn’t that its own kind of dishonesty? But how could I think I had nothing to confess? That idea betrayed a dangerous arrogance, the heresy that I had somehow received “enough” salvation. I was a wretch. If it weren’t for God’s ongoing grace, I would be dead in my sin a thousand times over, a rotting corpse with flies eating my eyes.

Was I supposed to disown Jesus so that I could accept him again? Was my refusal to re-invite him into my heart evidence of pride or subconscious rebellion? I wanted one of the counselors to tell me how to respond, but they were probably all occupied with the kids having real spiritual crises. I wasn’t the lost sheep; I was one of the 99. Maybe that meant I wasn’t Jesus’ concern.

The bonfire burned down to smoldering coals while I walked alone through the outer darkness. A sneering voice in my head whispered that I wasn’t good enough for God

because I'd never been bad.

Back in the tent, my friends were having a heart-to-heart. LeAnn said she'd been really convicted. "After tonight, I feel closer to God than I have in a long time," she said.

"Don't you guys ever just wanna rob a bank or something, so you can really experience forgiveness?" I asked. The other girls' faces betrayed total confusion.

"You don't need to rob a bank in order to experience forgiveness, McKenzie," Jenny said. "We all need God's forgiveness, all the time." But I couldn't perform spiritual brokenness I didn't feel. I clicked off the flashlight. In the darkness, I wondered how I could feel closer to God without first feeling far away.

Back home at youth group, we watched clips of an R-rated movie about a village in Kenya ravaged by man-eating lions. "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour," my youth pastor read (1 Pet. 5:8). We had to stay vigilant and alert, to watch out for sin stalking its way into our hearts.

Life became a sin scavenger hunt. At the end of every day, I curled up with my journal in my blue-and-green loft bed for a moral inventory. "How have I been disappointing you lately, God?" I wrote. "I don't know how to kill my pride. Do I need to have more faith?" I berated myself: "Either I haven't realized that my sin is offensive and hurtful to you and I need to change, or I don't care! God, I don't want to be apathetic—lukewarm. Please, soften my heart."

Self-criticism became a bid for divine attention. The more I reiterated my sins, the more aware I was of my need for forgiveness, which meant the more grateful I would be for salvation.

"Today at church," I wrote, "Mark the Youth Pastor said we're not fully dependent on your grace because we don't understand how badly we need it. God, I do not know the depths of my own depravity!" An internal voice grew strong in my mind, meticulous and insistent. The sin monitor had one job: surveillance and recordkeeping of my sins, to protect me from the risk of thinking I didn't need Jesus.

Without realizing it, I had instrumentalized my self-criticism. Shame operated as a tool that allowed me to approach God correctly, as a humble recipient of undeserved

grace. Self-abasement became my religious practice.

Over a decade later, I read *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado's memoir about an abusive relationship. In a section titled "Dream House as Inventory," Machado writes of her partner, "She makes you tell her what is wrong with you. This is a favorite activity; even better than her telling you what is wrong with you. Years later, it's a habit that's hard to break."

My sophomore year of high school: another church camp. This one was our annual spring break trip to California, where we stayed at our youth pastor's parents' house.

These spring break trips were supposed to be life-changing. It was 2009, and our cultural touchpoint was the iPhone. In keeping with the formula, we had to start by recognizing our sinfulness, so the first night we gathered in the living room for a talk titled "iSuck." Pastor Mark hit all the basics: everyone has sinned; no one is exempt from damnation. Sin separates us from God, who is the source of all goodness. Later in the week, Mark would get around to salvation, but we couldn't get there without first contemplating depravity.

After the talk, I slunk upstairs with my purple polka-dot journal. This was the gospel, the story I'd been steeped in my whole life. I had to make sure I didn't become numb to it. My sinfulness should grieve me. Maybe I could journal myself there.

"God," I wrote, "I am *really* awful. No matter how many times I write that, I'm not sure I get it. I mean, every cell in me is inherently evil. I cannot—I lack the capability to—do *any* good whatsoever on my own." I whipped myself into a devotional frenzy. "Since I am full of sin even from the day of conception (Psalm 51:5)," I wrote, "I cannot exist in your presence. That's the implication my filthy sin has! Everything that is good will be taken from me for eternity if I am not absolved!"

Religious scrupulosity is defined as the obsessive analysis of the moral dimensions of everyday life. Psychologists identify it as maladaptive, which means it provides immediate but temporary relief, while undermining health and wholeness in the long term. When scrupulosity reaches a clinically significant level, it is diagnosed as a subtype of obsessive compulsive disorder.

Obsessive compulsive behavior is distinguished by ritual activities done to offset anxiety: checking the stove, fixating on numbers, washing one's hands. In a way, the religious cycle of brokenness, repentance, and renewal mirrors this anxious

behavior. You feel bad, you perform a ritual to address the bad feeling, and then you feel better. Until you don't—so you do it again and again. You grow dependent on the ritual, but it ceases to solve the anxiety. The cycle becomes a snare.

The next day of the spring break trip was beach day. The other girls and I layered Soffe shorts over our one-piece swimsuits and spent the bus ride through Orange County French-braiding each other's hair, singing "Ocean Avenue" by Yellowcard whenever we caught a glimpse of the churning Pacific surf. We dove under the waves and lay on towels and laughed ourselves silly while burying each other in the sand. We roasted hot dogs over a bonfire and explored coastal rock formations and took a dozen pictures of the sun colliding with the horizon. But those carefree, effortless hours didn't last.

We returned from the beach sweaty and salty and with barely enough time to rinse off before that night's talk: "iBreak." Mark preached on the difference between a proud person and a broken person. On a whiteboard, he drew two columns.

"Proud people have a critical, fault-finding spirit," he wrote. On the other side, "Broken people are compassionate. They forgive much because they know how much they have been forgiven."

"Proud people are self-protective," while "broken people are self-denying."

The room was packed with tired bodies. Heat emanated from our sunburnt skin. With each bullet point, I felt myself sinking. My self-ignorance was deeper and more dangerous than the ocean we'd splashed in. My every action was tarnished by pride. Every desire, corroded.

"Proud people have a desire to be recognized and affirmed." "Broken people have a sense of their unworthiness."

I couldn't escape the cresting realization. Mark's summary of the proud person described *me*. Shame stained my cheeks. I felt revolted by my own soiled personhood. All I wanted was to flee.

After the talk, I sought refuge in my journal. "How can I start being broken?" I implored. "I can't just start acting the way a broken person would act, though, because then I would be nothing more than a hypocrite. Please break my spirit," I prayed. "In Luke 20, it says anyone who falls on Jesus will be broken to pieces.

That’s what I want!” I probed my relationship with God for cracks, which I was determined to find but unwilling to manufacture.

That Thursday night—Cry Night, Come-to-Jesus Night—Pastor Mark preached that we could confess our sins and be reconciled to Christ. The periwinkle light outside was fading. Jonathan, who led the worship band, brushed his fingers over the strings of his acoustic guitar.

The air shimmered with intensity. The Holy Spirit was in our midst.

One of the seniors—a popular guy named Chris who would eventually pursue a career in missions—raised his hand. “I think God is telling me there’s something I need to confess,” he said. He stood. The words flushed out of him in a torrent. “My girlfriend and I haven’t stayed pure. We get naked together all the time. We haven’t had sex, but we call it pretend sex—and it’s been pulling me away from God. I need to come clean.”

“You are forgiven,” Mark said. Tears glowed in the boy’s eyes. Chris’s words set off a chain reaction, a domino train of confession and repentance. One kid admitted to smoking pot; a girl burst into tears and said she’d been looking at porn. Student after student stood and acknowledged their brokenness and sank to their knees in grief and reassurance. No sin was too much: everyone who confessed could be forgiven.

Jonathan strummed chords to the self-effacing worship songs we sang each week. The lyrics reverberated off the walls of my mind: “A thousand times I’ve failed, still your mercy remains.” Over and over, Jonathan repeated the phrase. Open weeping blurred into grateful praise. Once they felt cleansed, my peers rose to their feet and lifted their arms, rejoicing. Others, limp with relief, wilted to the floor.

I perched at the top of the stairs, a bystander to a closed system that didn’t include me. I wanted to be down in the fray, thrashing my body in the mosh pit of repentance, joining the others in their mourning and renewal. I wanted to feel forgiveness wash over me. I wanted to feel my heart strangely warmed. I wanted to feel. But the contradictions of my beliefs kept me trapped there, my skin an electric fence. I ached to be as worthy of God’s attention as the lost sheep.

Every three to four months I packed my duffel bag, climbed into the church van, and drove off to do it again. And when I came home, I mustered the enthusiasm to tell

my nonbelieving friends that I'd had such a great time, that next time they should come, so they could rip their chests open, too, and stare into the void of their unworthiness. So they could be saved.

The rituals of church camp ignored the fundamental assertion that nothing could separate me from the love of God (Rom. 8:39). Psalm 139, which I memorized for one of those spring break trips, says it's impossible to hide from God. On calm days, I believed God was closer to me than the vocal cords I used to whisper his name. Why did our leaders spend so much time insisting how far from God we were? Participation in these rituals, multiple times a year, was like turpentine, stripping away my ability to self-evaluate. The repetition carved neural pathways in the putty of my mind that would prove more powerful than any memorized points of theology, any string of verses.

Throughout high school, I watched as friends' brains developed addictions to the pattern of gratuitous confession, emotional upheaval, and catharsis. Meanwhile, I couldn't complete the cycle. My faith was weaponized against me. I began to doubt my own experience, to question my convictions and defer to others. When my inner voice contradicted my leaders' teachings, I stopped listening to myself altogether. My own voice became foreign to me, suspect and untrustworthy.

The men who ran my youth group believed these practices and rituals would draw us closer to God. But systems have a way of transcending the intentions of the individuals who enforce them. The system self-perpetuates at any expense. Those who should have protected me supported the system, even as it consumed its adherents.

No Spirit settled on me. No tongues of fire, no cloak of brokenness. For years, I believed God was passing over me. I interpreted my lack of brokenness to mean that I didn't deserve God's presence. These instances—when everyone else seemed touched by God except for me—equated to divine abandonment. As the evangelical slogan asks, "If you feel far from God, who moved?"

This is what religious trauma looks like. I still find myself facing down the blade of a manufactured inner voice hell-bent on convincing me of my unworthiness. I've spent much of my life hunched over the whetstone of the church, sharpening that blade. We called this discipleship; we called it cultivating humility. But those terms misdirect. My inner knowing was invalidated and erased. These rituals negated my

sense of safety and replaced it with beliefs of my unworthiness. It took me years to find the right language for all this: spiritual violence.

If I could, I would sneak back through the years, back into the living room of that spring break house, one last time. I'd slip up the stairs to where my 15-year-old self is crouched, paralyzed with shame, and I'd take her clammy hand.

"We can leave," I say. Her eyes are full of fear. My fingers tighten around hers. "No one is paying attention to us."

She glances at the floor below, where the other kids writhe, pierced by the arrows of conviction. We slip out the sliding glass back door, past the fenced yard, into the open field beyond.

"Don't I need to be forgiven?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Nothing is wrong with you. This is the good news."