

The first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism is essentially, “**Why did God put us on this earth?**” The answer? “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” In other words, the answer the catechism gives is that God created us first and foremost to *worship*.

While worship is unquestionably central to the life of our church, few places in the Bible give us any detail about why we worship. The Old Testament says a lot about worship, but most Christians believe many of those instructions, like the ones related to sacrifices, no longer apply. What’s more, the New Testament doesn’t present us with a “manual” for worship either. It does talk about several worship services, and it offers a few guidelines for worship. In all cases, there is an expectation that it builds up the Church. As Jesus said to the woman at the well, we are meant to worship “in spirit and in truth.” Perhaps because of our longing for spirit and truth, we Christians worship God with an endless variety of forms and styles. We don’t worship only to pray and praise and hear God’s Word and respond. **We worship because it expresses and deepens our relationship with God in Christ.**

In a real sense every worship service is somewhat like a wedding. We don’t have weddings just to get dressed up and look at people who are even more exquisitely dressed than we are. Do we? Weddings exist to seal a *covenant* relationship between a man and a woman. One of Scripture’s most important symbols of the relationship between God and his people is that of the *covenant*. One of God’s central covenants with us begins with *his promise to be our God*. In fact, there would be no covenant between God and us had God not first initiated his promise. God’s people in turn respond to God’s covenantal promises by promising to be God’s people. We promise to love and to serve the Lord faithfully and exclusively.

Covenants are often established by some kind of ritual or event. A bride and a groom covenant to love and serve each other in a wedding ceremony, but years later couples sometimes want to confirm this covenant of marriage, so they

renew their marriage vows. They don't necessarily repeat their original vows, but husbands and wives promise to uphold their original vows in what is basically a "covenant renewal" ceremony. In the congregation that I serve we also reaffirm our vows of baptism each year on Palm Sunday to begin our Holy Week journey with Jesus. That too is about keeping covenants.

Who could forget the opening scene in the movie *The Sound of Music* when Julie Andrews, Sister Maria in the film, was singing and dancing on top of the mountain? She was full of life, free and close to God. In ancient times people believed that going to the top of a mountain was a way of being closer to God. I believe it's still true today, like the trip we took to the Canadian Rockies a few years ago. We rode to the top of the mountain in Banff in a glass bottom gondola. For me it was exhilarating! For Jayne it was more terrifying! We could see the vastness and beauty of God's creation. It was a humbling experience that reminded me of how small I am in comparison to God.

Moses went up to the top of Mt. Sinai because God called him there. In verse 12 we read, "*The LORD said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.'*" Moses went as he was instructed and stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

While Moses was on the mountain moving closer to God, the Israelites became impatient. They didn't want to wait for Moses to return and so they put pressure on Aaron to do something. Later in the story, you may remember, the Israelites made a golden calf and worshiped it. To make such an image was idolatrous. God was not pleased since the people moved away from God.

I believe that life in 2025 is not unlike the time of the Israelites. It seems that people are moving farther away from God. Everyone is in a hurry and people are impatient. More and more people today decide to be masters of their own fate. Church attendance is declining. In 2022 Barna research data showed that 84 percent of pastors agree the trend of decreased attendance for in-person

worship due to COVID-19 will have a lasting impact, even after the pandemic is over. In some ways, the presence of God is becoming a distant reality.

**So how can we move closer to God and how can we rebuild our trust in God?** Where is the nearest hill we can ascend to recapture the glory of our awesome God? When Moses reached the mountain top it was covered by a cloud. Moses remained in the cloud for forty days. Moses couldn't see. He was living temporarily in a fog. In other words, Moses had no control over his present condition. He had to trust that God would eventually remove the cloud so that he could find his way back down.

**So first, by realizing we are not in control, we move closer to God.** There are simply some things beyond our capacity to control. An old poem tells of a woman who was walking through a meadow one day. As she strolled along, meditating on nature, she came upon a field of golden pumpkins. In the corner of the field there stood a majestic, huge oak tree. The woman sat under the oak tree and began musing about the strange twists in nature. She asked herself, "Why would tiny acorns grow on huge branches and huge pumpkins on tiny vines?" **She thought that perhaps God made a blunder with creation.** Before long the woman dozed off in the warmth of the late autumn sunshine. She was awakened when a tiny acorn bounced off her nose. **Chuckling to herself, she amended her previous thinking. Thank God it wasn't a pumpkin falling from the tree!** I guess God was right after all! God is in control of the big picture and God wants us to trust him in all circumstances. Like Moses, we live in a cloud, not always able to see clearly.

**Second, when Moses arrives at the mountain top he had to wait six days before God spoke to him.** Moses had no choice except to patiently wait. The impatience of the Israelites caused them to turn away from God and focus on idols. Their impatience not only affected their relationship with God; it disrupted the life of the whole community.

One time a man's car stalled in heavy traffic during rush hour just as the light turned green. All his efforts to start his car failed. In short order, a chorus of

honking came from the cars behind him. Feeling just as frustrated as the other drivers to get home, the man finally got out of his car and walked back to the first driver. He said to the man whose window was rolled down, **“I’m sorry, but I can’t seem to get my car started. If you’ll go to my car and work on it, I’ll stay here and blow your horn for you.”**

Patience is something we all lack at times. When we lose patience we are vulnerable. Like the Israelites we can easily be misled and follow someone or something that moves us further from God. By exercising patience we place our trust in God and live by faith. Consequently, we move closer to God.

**Third, while Moses was on the mountain it was consumed by a cloud.**

Moses experienced the awesome presence of God. Verse 16 says, *“The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai.”* Since Moses was in the cloud there were no other distractions, nothing to divert his attention away from God. He had no schedule, nor could he perform any daily tasks. He was unable to see anything, fix anything, or solve any problems. He was focused only on God and was therefore **humbled** by the experience. Sometimes we are asked to do things that are beneath us. Notice that Moses didn’t question God about going to the top of the mountain. Nor did he complain about the wait. **He humbled himself, waited patiently, and did everything God asked.**

Moses moved closer to God through this experience by *realizing he was not in control*. He also moved closer to God by *learning patience*. And finally, he moved closer to God because *he experienced humility*. In moving closer to God, God’s covenant with his people was confirmed. Reformed scholars suggest that Christian worship is like a “covenant confirmation ceremony” such as the one today’s Scripture describes.

**Each time we gather for worship, we essentially confirm the covenant God has made with us through Jesus Christ his Son.** In services of worship God also reminds his people of the promises he has made and kept in Jesus Christ. And we, God’s people, in turn renew the promises we have made to God. God’s children need this because we’re often so busy making so many

promises to others that we forget the promises God has made to us. **You and I are so busy trying to keep our promises to other people that we regularly fail to keep the promises we've made to God. Amen?**

**Of course, a covenant can be renewed only if it was made in the first place.** Israel confirms her covenant with God only because God first made that covenant through Moses at Sinai. Covenant renewal is also for our daily lives. Regular daily devotions, individually, with family, or with friends, is a way to hear God's promises by reading and studying God's word, prayerfully asking God to help us keep our promises to him. Each one of us can confirm and renew our covenant with God daily.

My 70th birthday was a few months ago. I know, I know, I don't look a day over 69! I calculate that in my lifetime, counting one per Sunday, I have attended around 3,640 services of worship. I've personally had well over 3,600 opportunities to remember God's covenant and to confirm his covenant to me. There are 52 days remaining in 2025. On this 313<sup>th</sup> day of the year I'm remembering God's covenant promise from Jeremiah 31. It says, *"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness"* (v. 3). What a truly incredible promise and reminder from God!

**Dear friends, the reason we worship is to come together to hear once again God's amazing promises. And so we can confirm—personally and as a community of believers—the covenant God has made with us.** Two times in today's reading the people make a promise to God saying, *"Everything the Lord has said we will do."* Then they pledge, *"We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey"* (vss. 3&7). **Well, did they obey everything the Lord had said?** Let's remember Jeremiah's prophecy: We learned from him that the two parties in this covenant **were not equal** because the people broke the covenant repeatedly, leading to divine judgment and exile. Dr. Bruce Metzger told us first year students at Princeton Seminary that living a life that pleases God can be summed up like this: *"Say what you mean and mean what you say."* We worship God to deepen our relationship with Christ and because we want to keep our promises! **That's the reason we worship. Amen.**