One of the old songs that marked my early Christian experience was the song by Rich Mullins called Awesome God. You know the lyrics, “Our God is an awesome God. He reigns from heaven above, with wisdom, power, and love. Our God is an awesome God.”

Without question, that word “awesome” has lost some of its significance in our day. We now describe a hot slice of pizza as awesome or a movie with super special effects. We throw that word around lightly. Language has fluidity, it shifts and morphs in its meaning. The word awesome has now come to mean “really good.” That cream-filled donut? “Awesome.”

But if something is awe-some, it means that it is awe-full. It provokes awe. It is full of awe. It makes one stop and say, “Whoa!” It’s a jaw dropping word. It’s the idea of a one-time, did somebody get that on tape?, kind of experience. In the course of one’s life, only a short list of things would be categorized as “awesome.”

In Psalm 97, the writer claims to have caught a glimpse of the awesome God. A theophany! A God-sighting. Like a storm chaser that has spotted a tornado, the Psalmist sees and says, “Look, all you people! It is the awesome power of God!”

As I read to you, Psalm 97, watch how the writer paints the picture of God. It is awe-inspiring. We should feel led to praise His holy name.

Read Psalm 97.

To understand the motive of this man who writes, we have to put ourselves in his shoes. What was the prevailing worldview at the time of his writing? Today, the leading worldview is that science has trumped religion. We are the result, many say, of blind evolutionary forces, random chance mutations, and we have been naturally selected, not supernaturally woven by a sovereign God. In this age of technology, the church battles with the culture who has a biological reason behind all things.

But that wasn’t the popular worldview of Psalm 97. In that era, the people saw the world as a footstool for the gods. Many deities were imagined, each one ruling over localities and regions. So, a newcomer, who moved into a new region, the first thing he would set out to do, was to be educated on who the local power was. Who was the god who reigned over this region? And even more importantly, how can I avoid offending him?

So you see, the people of ancient times lived in fear of the gods, hoping to keep them at bay. In other words, let the “sleeping dogs” of heaven lie.
This is essential knowledge to rightly understand v.1. What a countercultural comment this was. Yahweh reigns! Let whole world be glad for that! Even the distant shores—let those sea-peoples rejoice!

In our song of America, we say: “God shed His grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.” We recognize our boundary. From the Pacific to the Atlantic, this land is our land. From California, to the New York Island.

But God claims no territory or boundary. God rules over the entire universe! He reigns over all regions. V.9 says, “He is exalted far above all other gods.” This, of course, is not an acknowledgement that other gods do exist. No, this is simply a statement that there is only ONE ruling superpower. His name, Yahweh. To Moses, he said his name was, “I Am who I Am.”

Now look with me at the picture of the power of God. These next five verses were given to you, so that you might say of the Lord, “Awesome.”

V.2, “Clouds and thick darkness surround him.” Let’s stop right there. That’s a thunderstorm effect. The idea of thick ominous clouds cloaking the face of God.

Surely you have been out in the open air when a storm snuck up on you. This has happened to you, right? I can recall as a boy, fishing with my brothers one summer day. We had ridden our bikes several miles a favorite fishing hole. We had our line cast in the water and they were bitin’. It would have taken an act of Congress to get us away from those catfish. So when the clouds started rolling in, I looked over to my older brother and said. “Oh, it’ll blow over. Looks like a false alarm.” I was wrong.

Seconds later, that false alarm sounded! Boom! When the fury of that storm hit, we were terrified. We were overpowered.

These clouds and darkness, pictured in v.2, represent the mysterious power of God that can roll in at any moment. And we should not think that this language of the Psalmist is original. This isn’t the first thunderstorm of God recorded in Scripture. No, the Psalmist is borrowing word pictures from previous incidents. Do you remember, on the heels of the Exodus, the people of God looked up and saw Mt. Sinai and it scared them to death. Exodus 19:16-19:

*On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. 17 Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, 19 and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Exodus 19:16-19*
That same phenomena of thunder and smoke also occurred when God appeared to Isaiah, and other prophets, like Ezekiel, Daniel, and Micah.

One of God’s favorite ways to manifest himself, of showing off his power is by the production of a superstorm. Every once in a while, it’s a good thing for you and I to look to the heavens which proclaim his power, and to tremble. Isaiah saw the awesome power of God and cried, “Woe is me.” Ezekiel “fell facedown,” the Word says. Daniel “turned pale.” Habakkuk wrote these words, “I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound...my legs trembled.”

I want to tell you that God is more than your heavenly buddy or pal. He is the high king. And Psalm 95 says, “Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker (95:6).”

The rest of this section flows from that idea. V.2, righteousness and justice are his foundation. He balances the scales and nobody gets away with rebellion. This God holds men accountable for their actions and attitudes.

V.3, “Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side.” You don’t mess with this God, and you don’t trivialize his laws. This image of fire is a common picture of the wrath of God. He hates what is evil, he loves what is good. He burns away the dross, refining the gold.

And some read these words in the Psalms and say, “Well, this God of wrath does not square up with the God who wraps himself in skin and shows mercy.” God is mean in the OT and nice in the NT! That’s not true, His love and compassion comes through loud and clear in the OT and Jesus did not, in the NT, refrain from demonstrations of righteous danger. Have you not read the account of Jesus turning over tables and making whips and driving people out of the temple that they had turned into a entrepreneurial enterprise? Jesus had fire in his eyes in the NT in certain moments. Our God hates what is evil. Always has. He is a consuming fire.

V.4, “His lightning lights up the world, the earth sees and trembles.”
V.5, “The mountains melt like wax before the Lord.”

More images of an Almighty God who has the power to flick on the big lights and to turn the highest stones to Jello.

Now Remember. Let me say it again. The psalmist lived in the day when people would say, “Yahweh is Lord” and in the same breath, “And so is Baal in this region!” So what is the Psalmist doing here? He is presenting the exclusivity of the one true God. There IS and always has been ONE way to heaven.

V.6, “all of the heavens”, what are they doing? They are proclaiming “his righteousness” and all of the peoples on the planet? They are viewing “his glory.” Do not be confused. There is only ONE that is awesome in power.
I don’t know if you saw the You Tube video of the guy in the mall parking lot in Birmingham, who drove his car in circles and taped the wrath of a supersized tornado? In my estimation, the man was off his rocker! The footage is raw and the little camera he used was shaking violently because of the fear he felt in his heart...being that close to something so strong. And let me tell you why I label him a lunatic. Because if that thing had shifted in direction, he would have known first hand all-consuming power. He was right to be afraid. He should have been MORE afraid.

That’s what the first half of this Psalm is suggesting. Like the biggest supercell you have ever seen, the God who reigns will deal with those who don’t take him seriously. V.7, “All who worship images will be put to shame.”

And what the Psalmist does now, in the remainder of this chapter, is simply this. He outlines the power of God and what it produces in his people, in his loyal, covenant keeping people.

V.8, “Zion hears and rejoices, and the villages of Judah are glad.”

So he reduces his audience dramatically. We’re no longer talking about all the peoples of the earth. We are now talking about the select people of God, his nation, his sanctified people, his set apart church. The people who serve Him and Him only. What does he do in return? What power does he offer to them in exchange for their loyalty? What decrees does he issue?

**What the King Says To His People**

1. **Be a “hater” of evil. (v.10a)**

V. 10a….

To love God means to love what he loves and to hate what He hates.

Pastor Jimmy Evans tells the story of a childhood lesson he learned. There was a particular member of his family growing up, that whenever Jimmy went to his house, the room was filled with gossip. He said, “Each time I was there, everyone not present was being talked about.” You ever been to a house like that? Or a lunch like that? Jimmy remembers that experience and he says, “I hated that house.”

I know it sounds harsh, but the Word says it very clearly: there are some things that we should hate. I want you to listen to Proverbs 8:13:

> To fear the **Lord** is to hate evil;  
> I hate pride and arrogance,  
> evil behavior and perverse speech. Prov. 8:13

If we live in fear of God and we know his awesome power, we will avoid those things at
all costs.

- I will kill pride in my own life the moment I sense it, and I will avoid close associations with people who give off a prideful vibe.
- I will kill arrogance when I sense it in myself or when others point it out to me, and I will avoid close associations with people who lack humility and like themselves too much.
- I will cease evil behavior when the Holy Spirit says I’m doing somebody wrong, and I will stay away from people who delight in questionable behavior.
- I will apologize when perverted things come out of my mouth. God hates perverted speech. And I will stay away from people who speak like perverts and who refuse to place a filter over their mouth.

Don’t misunderstand. I will not be a hateful person, but I will be a hater of sin, especially when I see it in me. As Nathan the prophet said to David, “You are the man.”

If you love the King, you will loyally serve in His kingdom. You will obey his commands and it will be a joy, not a burden.

#2, the second thing he says to this servants, and this one is not a command, but a promise.

2. **Be assured that I will preserve your life. (v.10b)**

The NIV says…

The KJV says he “preserveth the soul of his saints.” I like that even better! “Preserveth.” What a cool word. Lynley would you place these leftovers in the refrigerator? Let us preserveth them.”

I was curious what that word meant, “preserve, or guard.” It the Hebrew word, “shaw-mar” and it means to keep a careful watch over. God keeps a careful watch over his kids.

This made me think about a mother at swimming pool. While the husbands chitchat and cover college sports, the women multitask with their mouth moving in conversation, but one eye always hovering over the water. She is always watching the toddler who walks carelessly beside the tank of water. She watches over him as no one else is.

When you are loyal to the Lord, this is the loyalty he offers to you. He guards your life.

What a comforting notion for us as believers, especially in times of trouble. I spoke to a young man this week who lost a long-time girlfriend. It’s a frightening thing to lose a relationship, especially one that you’ve learned to lean on. But listen to the voice of God to the one who is “dumped.” “I won’t ever dump you.” You can count on this relationship at all times. I’ve got your back. I’m with you. I’ll protect you, guard you, watch over you.”
What a freeing thought.

#3, another promise…

3. Be assured that I will give you victory. (v.11)

V. 11…

Light in this instance symbolizes victory. Psalm 27 says, “the Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? Whom shall I fear?” Nobody! Because I am on the winning side. He has won it! He has saved me!

What a great feeling to be victorious. To walk into a classroom and kill a test and walk out knowing you “aced it.” I had a professor in college who was “over-the-top” tough. He was the drill sergeant of science. We had to submit these massive lab reports to him and they were always returned with red ink top to bottom. One day, my friend Chad received his report back, and on the top was written one word inscribed in red ink, “flawless”. Oh man! All year long he rode that gravy train. He pulled out that report like a sharpshooter pulls a pistol for the rest of the year: “Flawless, flawless, flawless!” He knew he had me beat. That’s the feeling of victory.

To hit the shot at the buzzer for an overtime win. To catch the “hail mary” in the final seconds of the football game. What a moment it is when we experience victory! It’s a phenomenal feeling and that’s what the Psalmist is saying about serving the King. You are forever on the winning side.

This past week, I watched some of the ESPN documentary on Michigan’s Fab Five from the early 90’s. College basketball fans, you know what I’m talking about. Fisher started five freshman, and one of the most talented players on the team was Chris Webber. I watched the tape from the post-game interview, just after he had called a timeout that his team didn’t have. He cost his team the national championship vs. North Carolina. There is no other way to say it but to say that he “blew it.” As he sat there at the press conference, with a blank look on his face, one of the reporters has the gall to ask him this question, and I paraphrase, “Chris, have you ever felt any worse than you feel right now? Is this as bad as it has ever been???”

And Webber just sits there numb. You can see that he wants to dip under that table and disappear. He is a picture of the agony that follows defeat. There is no joy in that moment. And that’s the way that you can expect to live, says the Psalmist, if you reject the rule of the King.

But there is ONE who can bring victory to the righteous, joy to the upright in heart. The joy of the Lord can be your strength. If you’ll put God on the throne of your life, if you surrender your soul to him, if you will obey his commands and listen to his voice, then he will give you moments of sheer joy when everything flawless. Flawless! Victory over my enemies, victory over my sin, victory over my grave. Only God can do this.
And so this leads us to the final saying of the sovereign King. The Psalm ends with a command.

4. **Be joyful always. (v.12)**

V.12…

It doesn’t make sense for a winner to walk around with the face of a loser. If God is for you, who can be against you?

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? 33 Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Rom. 8:32-33

So forget the Michigan press conference. Let’s hop over to the North Carolina press conference! The King’s court meet there and it’s a totally different picture. It’s a room full of joy and jubilance! You would think those men were just rescued from a pool of pirannas! They are beside themselves with joy. That’s a picture of the future of the church.

But I want you to notice something in the text that is critical to understanding the meaning of the verse. It says, “Rejoice in the Lord.”

It does not say, “Rejoice in your life.” In some seasons, life offers little to celebrate. If we anchor our souls to the ups and downs of life, then we are in for a roller coaster ride. But this is why Paul could say from prison, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, “Rejoice.”

Paul would have loved the song: My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name.

The man who fears God will refuse to host a pity party. He will reject the invitation to pout. This would not be fitting in the court of the King. Through Him, we are empowered with an AWESOME power.