

Sublime: by Graham Mol

Romans 11:33-36

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable His judgments,
and His paths beyond tracing out!

“Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been His counsellor?”

“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?”

For from Him and through Him and for Him are all things.

To him be the glory forever! Amen.

This excerpt of scripture is referred to as a doxology, a short hymn of praise to God. Paul places this doxology in his letter to the Church at Rome. It comes after he has discussed the redemptive plan of God. It's a moment of awe and wonder expressed beautifully. You can feel the emotion behind Paul's words.

“Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” There is no bottom, it goes deeper and deeper. We cannot begin to understand, it is unfathomable. Who has known the mind of the Lord? His thoughts are not our thoughts, they are high above. Consider His benevolence, all that we have is from Him, in fact all things are from Him, through Him and for Him. The correct response, our only true response to who God is, is to give Him the glory.

In this short doxology Paul gives us a glimpse of the Sublime. That is not the modern use of the word sublime (such as “That meal was sublime!” (very, very nice). Rather it is the Sublime as described by the 18th Century, Irish philosopher Edmund Burke.

For Burke a sublime is experience is indeed one that is good but for an unusual reason. It is an experience that makes us feel insignificant and small. A sublime experience is one that humbles us. He differentiates it from a beautiful experience that moves or inspires us, it is something that is so astounding and even terrifying. His point being that there's a particular pleasure to be felt in the mighty things of nature: thunderstorms, the stars, vast deserts, oceans, the icecaps.

Take a moment to imagine a massive storm: the dark clouds, the howling wind, violent flashes of lightning and the deafening thunder soon after. It can be terrifying and yet exhilarating as well. What can you do in the face of that storm? Nothing. This experience helps put things into perspective. In comparison to the storm the familiar irritants of daily life seem less significant.

Something similar happens when we contemplate an enormous mountain reaching, seemingly touching, the sky. Or when we gaze up at the stars and consider the vastness of the universe.

David's Psalm 8 is a perfect example of a sublime experience:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?
(Psalm 8:3-4)

Another perfect example is when Jesus and His disciples were out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and a storm blew in. Jesus is sleeping in the stern of the boat while the violent storm rises up, tossing the vessel on the waves. Water started pouring over the sides of the boat. The disciples wake Jesus up crying: “Teacher, don't you care if we drown?”

[Jesus] got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to His disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still

have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (Mark 4:39-41)

The Disciples were terrified in that moment. A sublime experience can be quite intense and terrifying. Their eyes were opened to the reality of the Son of God. They were confronted with their smallness and God's greatness. And yet one can be sure that this moment was a treasured memory in the hearts of the disciples in the months and years ahead as they began to truly understand who Jesus is.

Those moments where we become aware of God's greatness and our smallness are sublime experiences and ones that are important for us to experience. A thesaurus gives the following entry on "sublime":

Some common synonyms of sublime are glorious, gorgeous, resplendent, splendid, and superb. While all these words mean "extraordinarily or transcendentally impressive," **sublime implies an exaltation or elevation almost beyond human comprehension.**

While Jeremiah was still confined in the courtyard of the guard, the word of the LORD came to him a second time: 2 "This is what the LORD says, He who made the earth, the LORD who formed it and established it – the LORD is His name: 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.'" (Jeremiah 33:1-3)

I love this word from God: "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know." I believe that the Lord offers us a similar invitation to that which he offered the prophet Jeremiah. The Lord wants to show us more, to reveal more of His glory and greatness. He has so much to impart to us. Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

Call to God. Seek His face. Seek out the sublime in the world He has created, those moments where you feel small, where the troubles and irritations of the day pale in insignificance to that which is so vast, so unsearchable.

But, and this is my final point, I want you to go further than that. One of the other things Edmund Burke discusses in his inquiry of the sublime and beautiful is that of shallow and deep pleasures. Shallow pleasures are the simple, immediately obvious, possibly instantly gratifying, pleasures of life. They can be good things and not necessarily sinful pleasures.

Then you have the deeper pleasures. Those that are not immediately obvious, those that take time and investment, effort. The sublime would fit into this category. Although not offering immediate pleasure it is the deeper pleasures or joys of life that give it greater meaning.

Let me give you a simple example. I love Chelsea Buns, especially the giant ones. This is a love affair that began in my varsity days at WITS. For a mere R3,50 you get a delicious giant Chelsea bun from the café. From then on, I was hooked. It's a shallow pleasure for sure, I enjoy eating the Chelsea bun, paired with a nice cup of tea its delicious! It's an immediate gratification and fleeting. It's not something that brings deep joy and significance to my life, in fact if overindulged it's a bad thing.

On the other hand. I love my family. My wife Candice and my kids, Luke and Claire. Having and raising children is a deeper pleasure. As any parent will know, there are moments that are not pleasurable at all. There are the tantrums, the crying, the disciplining. There's homework, tests, battling distractions. There's the moral pitfalls and peer pressures as they get older.

Yet despite the struggles it can be so rewarding to see these young people grow up before your eyes. The joy of their achievements and discoveries, the laughter and surprises. Witnessing them become the people God created them to be is a deep, and meaningful joy and pleasure in my life.

Yet there is a deeper, and more meaningful joy than that. The deepest and greatest pleasure, the greatest meaning in life is to know the Lord Jesus our Saviour.

You make known to me the path of life; in Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psalm 16:11)

Take delight in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:4)

There is nothing more sublime, nothing more astonishing, more humbling, more vast, than the love of Jesus who gave His life for us. There is no pleasure deeper or greater or more meaningful than living in His love.

I hope that you will call out to the Lord, that you will seek His glorious face. Seek out the sublime in this world He created. May you delight in the Lord. May your desire be for His presence in your life.