

1 Peter 4:10-12

I came across a great story the other day which illustrates in a very powerful way what Peter is saying to us in verse 10 of chapter 4. There we read: 'Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.' Deep in the Luray Caverns of Virginia stands the console of a unique organ. Ages of seeping water have created thousands of stalactites, icicles in stone, hanging from the vaults of the caves. Each stalactite resonates, when struck, with a slightly different tone. The organ builder explored the cavern till he found the right stalactite for each note in the full range of an organ console. Some had to be 'tuned' by chipping away a bit of their length. He then wired an array of motorised mallets so that each stalactite could be struck from the keyboard of the organ. Apparently, visitors who have heard the music long remember the deep, throbbing echoes of the singing rocks. My question is: if such melodic variety may be found in calcium deposits, what varied tones has God's Spirit given to the heirs of Christ's glory? You see, we are servants, we are only servants, we are servants of God, we are servants to each other; if you like, we are ministers of the many shades of the grace of God. You will remember that in 1:6, Peter spoke of the different trials Christians must face; here, in this verse, he presents 'variety' of yet another kind: it is the multifaceted grace of God. The term translated 'in its various forms' is sometimes used of a wide range of colours as if you were looking at the latest Dulux paint chart; having said that, it can also be applied to the colours of precious gems or stones. One commentator makes another comparison when he says: 'The rainbow colours of spring flowers can only suggest the richness of the gifts of God's grace.' Whatever analogy you prefer is your choice; the plain fact is, God has gifted his people in so many ways and when we use our gifts to the glory of God, then his grace is reflected through our lives in a vast array of beautiful tones and shades. I think this is tremendously important for it is only as we

function in this way that growth will come to the church; this is the people of God operating in a most efficient and highly effective manner, and when we do that, not only is our potential as Christians realised in God, but the wider world is impacted by our consistent testimony. You see, the gifts that we have received are not for our own benefit, they have been allocated to us so that we might bless others! They are not meant to specifically boost my personal ego nor are they designed to aid my search for self-fulfilment, neither are they dispensed so that we might establish our own identity. The gifts are given to us primarily for acts of service and we must never lose sight of that fact. When Peter speaks about the gifts of the Spirit, he does it, not to focus on ourselves, but to shine the main beam on the Lord and on others. He would have us look to the Lord for the gifts that we need to serve him and others in his name. Peter approaches the subject of gifts from a slightly different perspective to that of Paul. He doesn't offer us a big long list where many of the gifts are outlined in detail, he is content to leave that kind of approach to Paul, and if you want any further information on that score, you can read the four main chapters which deal with it when you have a couple of minutes to spare: they are Romans 12, Ephesians 4 and the ones that most folk are familiar with, 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 14. Peter, as we have discovered so often in his epistle, has his own way of doing things, so when it comes to the subject of gifts he narrows it down to two areas of special importance and I feel that in each of these there is a list of gifts which could be attached with no problem whatsoever. He says in verse 11: 'If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.' We can quickly summarise it like this: when we speak, we shouldn't be voicing our own opinions nor should we be promoting our own ideas about life; it's not what I think that matters for that is of little significance in the light of eternity, rather, we should be speaking 'the very words of God'. And when we serve,

we shouldn't be doing so in our own strength, nor should we be relying on our own skill or ability; because I did it yesterday is no guarantee I will be able to do it today! The fact is, every activity that we engage in should be carried out in the strength which God generously and graciously provides. You see, no matter what angle you wish to view it from, there are two fundamental principles which emerge: the first one is, God enables us and, the second one is, God equips us for the task in hand! Having said that, the ball lands squarely back in our court when it comes to how we use the gifts which God has given to us. Peter's passing reference to speaking in verse 11 is not directed in the first instance to the kind of casual conversation we exchange on a daily basis between a few friends. Peter has in mind the preaching and teaching of the word of God. In Acts 10:44 we note that he himself spoke the words of God to the household of Cornelius. Actually, Paul in 2 Corinthians 2:17 said of his own teaching: 'unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit; on the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.' The emphasis here is on the grace that is needed to speak the word of God. We know from what we read in Ephesians 4 that inspired apostles and prophets were responsible for the foundation on which the house of God was built. Others join in the ministry of the word, building on their foundation. Those of us who have the tremendous privilege and awesome responsibility of speaking the word of God today must depend upon the anointing of the Holy Spirit to proclaim what is on the heart of God as revealed in the word of God. The man is a fool who thinks he can stand up there and do it in his own strength and under his own steam without the aid of the Spirit of God. As someone has rightly said: 'Preaching God's word is not a mechanical task; human eloquence is ineffective apart from the blessing of the Holy Spirit.' The serving ministry that Peter focuses on in the next phrase may be a specific reference to the role of deacons in the local assembly; if that is the case, it is set alongside the teaching ministry of those who are undershepherds of God's flock; it may be, it may

not be: the underlying truth is the same either way for it doesn't matter what kind of service we do, we are always to do it in the strength that God gives. And how important that is! It is so easy for us to operate in our own strength, we feel we can do it, we know we can do it, therefore, we roll up our sleeves and get on with it without even resorting to the Lord for his touch upon our lives. When we go down that road, our lives are certainly the poorer for we have missed out on the blessing of God and we have also missed out on a golden unique opportunity to prove what God can do in us and through us in our moments of weakness. I have no doubts in my mind that, irrespective of how huge and challenging and stretching the job may be or how small and insignificant and run-of-the-mill the task may seem, it is always best to seek God for his divine enabling. No matter how much confidence oozes from our pores, no matter how we feel, it is a million times better to lean and rely on the Lord than it is to stand at the crease and bat on your own. 'All of these gifts,' according to Chuck Swindoll, 'have one thing in common. They come alive in serving other people. Think of it this way,' he says, 'when we employ our spiritual gifts, others benefit, others are encouraged, others gain fresh hope. Interestingly, so do we!' I think we all realise, he is absolutely right! It seems to me there are two well-worn clichés that are particularly relevant at this point: the first one states, you can be too big for God to use but you can never be too small, and, the second one informs us, little is much when God is in it! If you take another look at the verse, the reason why Peter encourages us to pursue this course of action with regard to our involvement in ministry becomes incredibly clear: he says, we do it 'so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.' That means, when we do it the way God intended us to do it, his benediction rests on all that takes place and his name is lifted high. He is exalted, he is magnified, he is honoured, he is glorified! And, when you stop and think about it, this is all that really matters; this has to be seen as the baseline for

all our service in the name of Jesus. In everything, God gets the glory! I just wonder, how many church conflicts could be resolved if God's glory were everybody's goal? I can't help but ask, how many egos would be put in their place if God's glory, not our glory, were at stake? Or perhaps, how much extremism would be avoided if we did all for the greater glory of God? You see, as someone has said: 'When we keep his glory uppermost in our minds, it's amazing how much else falls into place. Since he gets the glory, we're more comfortable leaving the results with him in his time. Since he gets the glory, our umbrella of love expands to cover others. Since he gets the glory, it's easier for us to show hospitality to others, for we're ultimately serving him. Since he gets the glory, exercising our gifts is not a pain but a privilege. The benefits are endless when the glory goes to God.' Is it any wonder, then, that the section ends with a hearty 'amen' from the pen of Peter? It's a warm response to the attributes of God which Peter has just been outlining, he is a God of power, he is a God of eternity, he is a God of glory! If you like, it's an unmistakable affirmation of who God is. And, because God is who he is, that explains why he does what he does; and that's why we ascribe unto him the praise which he so deserves. In the words of the old gospel song: 'To God be the glory, great things he has done!'

Let's move on to the final few verses of 1 Peter 4 where the focus switches back to that of suffering. It divides fairly neatly into two compact sections: from verse 12 down to verse 16 it's all about the joy of fellowship with Christ in the midst of trial; verses 17-19 remind us of the confidence of commitment to God in the hour of difficulty. Peter is talking here in verse 12 about those who are going through a particularly rough patch in their lives, it's when we face a fiery trial, a painful ordeal, it's when we find ourselves in a worsening desperate situation. He writes: 'Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.' The nuts and bolts of Peter's heart

warming message in this section is a tender reminder that suffering for Christ's sake is not unexpected nor is it unaccountable. Indeed, if the truth be told, if we really understand why suffering comes into our lives, we will not only accept it, but as we will discover in the next verse, we will rejoice in it! Now, when you talk like that to people who are really going through the mill, people who find themselves in the crucible of suffering, people who can't see the wood for the trees, people who are totally dazed and shocked because they are reeling from one blow after another, people who are thoroughly confused, such words at best can seem a little trite and, perhaps, at worst, not a little blasé. It would seem, from reading between the lines, that there were those in the first century church who thought that following Jesus was an easy option through life. They felt that because they committed their life to Jesus Christ that everything from that day forward would be plain sailing. Some of them were probably hoping for a reasonably comfortable lifestyle and, even if the chilling wind of adversity did blow, they would assume because they were in the family of God that they would have a soft cushioned landing. Well, I imagine you probably know as well as I do, it ain't quite like that, at all! So far as trials and troubles are concerned, it's not a question of *if* they come, but *when* they come! What we need to remember is this, trials are inevitable in your life and mine, they are an integral part of God's overall plan for our lives; we are not immune from the hassles and heartaches of living in a less-than-ideal environment; the Lord sends trials into our lives not to harm us nor to hurt us but, in the longer term, he uses them to help us; he allows them to come into our lives not principally to pull the rug from under our feet and leave us floundering, but he permits them, so that, in his gracious providence, he can bless us through them. On a purely human level, that may not make an awful lot of sense, I suppose if it was left to us we would probably employ a less formidable strategy to bring about what we think is the desired effect; but, when all is done and dusted, our plan would not work, it would fail miserably; you see,

God knows what is best and that's the way a sovereign God chooses to operate in your life and mine! Anyway, who am I to argue with him? His track record is impeccable! I read an insightful comment from the pen of Stuart Briscoe where he wrote: 'God has graciously determined that his people should not be wafted off to heaven on a pink-edged cloud to sprout wings, polish halos and play harps. He ordained that his people should stay on earth and live realistically in the real world. And what is this real world? It is a world that has many glorious and beautiful aspects, but it's a world that is riddled with desperately painful aspects as well.' Trials come in all shapes and sizes; they last for different lengths of time, one may be over within a matter of minutes, another may extend over a protracted period; they may come unexpectedly and without any advance warning, or, you may see it coming at you and you can't get out of the way! Chuck Swindoll describes it like this: 'A trial can be like a rock hitting the water. You don't cause the jolt, but you're impacted by it. You're just standing there, and suddenly the smooth lake of your life surges into giant waves and almost drowns you.' Such is one man's experience, such is one man's encounter; yours may not be like that at all for God deals with us individually and, I think it's always good to remember, he doesn't make the back to fit the burden, rather, he makes the burden to suit the back! The lovely thing about the Lord is this, he doesn't test us so he can learn how well we are doing, he tests us so we can discover how well we are doing! Tough times, how do we handle them? How do we respond to them? The fact is, when the trial kicks down the front door of our lives, when it enters into our lives like a storm trooper, uninvited and unwelcome, it immediately infringes on our privacy as it seriously intrudes into our life, it impacts everything, it encroaches on every area of our lives including our interaction with family and friends; I can assure you, in moments of intense pressure like that when you feel there is precious little room for manoeuvre and you sense the screw is tightening, you don't necessarily have to end up wringing your hands in despair on an emotional roller coaster, you

don't always have to go into a spiritual tailspin! Who says we have to flip and then flop? That's what the enemy wants you to do, that's the response the devil is anticipating. It doesn't have to be like that, honest, it doesn't! Peter shares with his readers a better way to handle the harsh times when he writes in verse 13, 'But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.' We don't have time to go into it in today's study, we'll come back to it tomorrow, suffice to say: the Lord Jesus was born in abject poverty, as a child he was a refugee, he had to work very hard, he lived under a repressive political regime, his contemporaries misunderstood him and maligned him, in the end he suffered a high level of humiliation of being charged at a mock trial and found guilty when he was totally innocent. And, he died on a cross at Calvary, not for himself, but for you and for me! Yes, he suffered, he knows a thing or two about it; that's why Peter says, don't be surprised but rejoice when it comes your way!