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Preacher: David Earnshaw

[0 : 00] A couple of weeks ago, I was reading through Psalm 18.

And as I was reading through that Psalm, I saw a statement that made me stop. And sometimes when you are a preacher, you're reading God's Word, and a phrase or a word or a verse leaps out the Bible and says, Preach me. Preach me.

So I put it on one side, and I said to myself, On the Monday morning, I'll come and have a look at this. And so I want to speak about one expression that occurs in Psalm 18. Let me just say a few things by way of introduction.

Psalm 18 was written when David was at the zenith of his power. He had been an outlaw for many years, constantly chased by King Saul.

He said, At times I felt like a partridge, or we would say like a pheasant. In hunting season. Here comes the glorious twelfth. Well, not so for the pheasant.

[1 : 04] And here's David. He said, I was hunted like a partridge on the hill. But God had his hand on him. Saul was dead. All Saul's sons were dead.

And David was now king sitting on the throne. And so David thanks God that he's been brought through all these terrible days. And then he said this. Your gentleness has made me great.

It's verse 35. Your gentleness has made me great. Now, I've heard that thrown around in the Christian church. People have mentioned it.

I've actually mentioned it in prayer. But you know, sometimes our life is littered with biblical statements. That if we are pressed, we say, to be honest, I haven't a clue what I'm talking about. Your gentleness has made me great. And David not only says it here in Psalm 18, but also he says it in 2 Samuel chapter 12. I can see one of you too.

[2 : 10] You're looking. Is it not in the NIV? Shame on you. Get a decent Bible. Yes. Verse 35 says, You have also given me the shield of your salvation.

Your right hand has held me up. Your gentleness has made me great. Whenever you find a statement like that, you say, what on earth does it mean?

So you get your commentaries off your shelf. And I have ten commentaries on the Psalms. I pulled every commentary off and went through every commentary. Not one commentator mentions that. Even Mr. Spurgeon.

Mr. Spurgeon's great treasury of David. If you haven't got one of those, well, sell your shirt. And if you haven't got a shirt to sell, ask the church treasury to do a kind of active charity and buy you one. It's a wonderful kind of collection, not only of Spurgeon's thoughts on the Psalms, but also these quaint sayings that he's gathered from the Puritans and other such like people. One statement, I'm just digressing here, he has in Psalm 1 from one of the Puritans.

[3 : 13] I forget which Puritans it was who said it, but it goes like this. He who spits against heaven, remember, one day it will drop back in his face. Interesting wisdom, isn't it?

Well, even Mr. Spurgeon has nothing to say on your gentleness has made me great. So often, as is the case, I take hold of a blank piece of paper, an open Bible, and a pen, and say, Lord, what on earth is this all about?

So I've got a couple of simple things to say. Number one, what on earth is divine gentleness? One would expect to say, hear David say, Lord, your power and your authority has brought me through and has put me on the throne.

Not your gentleness. But he says, no, your gentleness has made me great. You see, gentleness to us is, well, let me explain.

It's the very same word as meekness. When Paul speaks about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians chapter 5, he speaks about meekness or gentleness. It's the very same word.

[4 : 21] And if we're absolutely honest, we sometimes feel that gentle people or meek people are a pushover. If someone is aggressive, you think twice about speaking to them.

But if someone's very, very timid, very kind of very gentle, we're quite happy to speak our mind because we know there's no comeback. They won't do it. That's an interesting policy in terms of bosses.

See who the boss picks on. Very rarely they pick on someone who answers. But, okay, someone who's very gentle. That's the kind of idea. But we've misunderstood the word gentleness and meekness.

To a Hebrew, gentleness is power that is under control. And what David is saying is this.

Lord, your power under control has made me great. Now, we see it in the Lord Jesus Christ, do we not?

[5 : 19] Why? Because the book of Revelation speaks about the Lord Jesus Christ being the lion of the tribe of Judah. You don't mess with lions.

I heard of two lions who one Saturday afternoon were walking down Regent Street. And one lion said to the other, I thought this was the busiest day of the week. There was nobody there.

Why? Because if you met a lion walking down the main street in Whitby, you'd be off. And the Lord Jesus is the lion of the tribe of Judah. You don't mess with him.

But also, he's the Lamb of God. And Isaiah said, oh, by the way, the Messiah comes, a bruised reed. He will not even break. By the way, his voice will not be raised in the street.

And I find it very staggering that the Lord Jesus, with one word, could have blown the world away. But he let men spit on him and punch him.

[6 : 26] That's strength under control. The Greeks used to speak about a gentle wind. And we know how strong the wind can be.

And it always seems every time I fly out of Bristol, it is always a strong wind. The whole plane shakes and all that kind of stuff.

But also, a wind can be very gentle. It's beautiful. That gentle zephyr. And also, it's used of a horse. The Greeks used to speak about a gentle horse.

And horses are stronger than us. Very, very strong. But when a horse has been broken in, even though it is strong, it is very gentle. You can lead it with a little bit of leather. It's also used of a man who has the right to take you to court and sue you, but chooses not to.

Have you ever been in that situation? To say, I could take you to the cleaners. But I won't do. I suppose the opposite is like meeting a celebrity and having the ability to tell nobody.

[7 : 38] Imagine if I was in Downing Street this week. Could I really keep it in? By the way, I've had quite a busy week. Sorry, the sermon's not as good as it should be, but I've missed the camera this week.

Could I keep that under control? And a gentle man can keep strong feelings under control. Like a horse led by leather.

Like a wind blowing like a zephyr. David says, Lord, your strength in gentleness has made me great.

And I thought to myself, but what is greatness? Right if I stood here and said, do you know, it's the Lord's gentleness in my life that has made me a great preacher.

You go, what? Did I mishear that? Who would go around the world saying, by the way, God's gentleness has made me great? So what does David mean?

[8 : 43] Well, you know in the words of Shakespeare that some men are born great. And some men achieve greatness and others have greatness thrust upon them. I would suggest that David had greatness thrust upon him.

Here he is looking after sheep the next minute. He's anointed with oil. You are the next king. You're the next king. And when David says, your gentleness has made me great, what he's saying is this. It's God, by his power, that has lifted me to the throne. And I'm only here in this position of authority because of God's gentle power. In other words, David is saying, I have fulfilled my potential because God has fulfilled it in me.

Now, I will never be the king of England or Israel or any other country. I can only be myself. But I think as God's people, we have the right to say it's God's gentleness that has made us who we are. And as long as I live the kind of life that God wants to live me, wants to live through me according to his word, then I think all of us have the authority to say it's God's gentleness that has made us

great.

[9 : 47] In terms of it's put us where we are. And I don't want to go to heaven. And the Lord said to me, well, David, why didn't you live David's life?

Why don't you spend your life trying to be everybody else? Just be yourself. And I've discovered something in life. I'm pretty good at being myself because there's no one else can do it. Is that right?

Because I am who I am. And God didn't make me Martin Lloyd-Jones. And he didn't make me Don Carson. You know, he didn't make me whoever you want. He said, David, you're the kind of person that I want to use in that situation.

And as long as you live within that anointing, you can honestly say it's God's gentleness that has put me right there. Move outside of that. You find yourself in big trouble.

So that's kind of what it means. Your gentleness has made me great. Then, understanding the mechanics of what this means, I then spoke to four areas of life.

[10 : 53] And that's what I want to speak about for the rest of this evening. If I could bring either people or things into this room tonight and give them a microphone and say, could you speak to us just for a couple of minutes?

And everyone or everything that I brought here would stand with a microphone in its hand and say, it's God's gentleness that has made me great.

So what on earth are you talking about? Let me explain. Number one. Creation. I don't know about you, but I love creation.

You know, sometimes it's good to go for a walk and to talk to the Lord with your eyes open. And living where you do, you should pray more often with your eyes open.

Because there's a beautiful American hymn that we don't sing in this country. I don't know why. It's lovely theology. It's a nice tune. This is my Father's world. It's my Father's world.

[11 : 55] One of the frustrating things about being an atheist is that you see a wonderful sunset and have got no one to say thank you to. And as I've been going around the country for the past two years or so, I've seen everything.

And I just go, it's great. This is wonderful. This is my Father's world. This is my Father's handiwork. And if this is a fallen world, what is the world to come going to be like?

And so I love creation. And I love watching David Attenborough on television. Why he whispers, I don't know.

Have you noticed? Look at this animal. This is four million years old. Turn down the sound. Forget what he says. I just look and go, Father, I say this in human terms.

Don't misunderstand me. Father, my heart swells with pride that my Father's put that there. Father, this is your handiwork. And he gets so excited.

[12 : 59] It's our God. I don't really think about this. I trained in horticulture. I was in the world of horticulture for six years in agriculture college and working for the National Trust and also working for Liverpool Botanical Gardens, trained to be a plantsman.

And I love it. I love it. Why? Because if we're not interested in what God has made, well, there's something wrong with us. So what happens?

There's a hymn that used to be sung by the primitive Methodists. These hymns are, they're kind of relegated to history. They'll never be sung. And they're rather quaint. But I love this one. I know who made the daisies.

Can you imagine a congregation singing out these days? I know who made the daisies and paints them starry bright. Yes? I know who clothes the lilies so sweet and soft and white.

Believe me, when you flower arrange, and I have done that in my life too. Okay? You may find that hard to believe. I sit in the church now because my eye has been trained.

[14 : 07] And I look at every flower arrangement and go, hmm, that's interesting. Okay? I'm going to pass no comment about what's behind me. Okay? Because when you are involved in putting flowers and leaves and colors and texture together, you've got to get it right.

If not, it is garish. It's like dressing. Some people can dress. Other people you think, well, that's interesting. Yes? Follow me through on this.

I have yet to find the Lord put colors together in His word of creation that clash. And you look at them and think, I would never put those together, but wow!

They're absolutely breathtaking. Who's done that? God's gentleness has painted the colors and made things so delicate.

We ought to think of creation in terms of power. He throws the mountains together and He throws the stars into the universe. Yes, but also He paints. When I was in Tanzania growing up in Kilimanjaro, I saw some hummingbirds.

[15:19] A hummingbird's wing flaps 50 times per second. That's faster than your engine goes getting you to church.

You know, the pistons going up and down 50 times a second. I can't even count to 50 in a second. It wasn't seconds ago. I mean, that time, the wing has gone up and down 50 times.

Who's made it? And it is so small and never gets tired. And then we just had winter and I'm sure it's been severe here. I've heard how severe it's been. It was severe for the south of England too and what happens?

Thick duvet, 13.5 togs, get the blanket on top, keep the heating running, put your coats on, hats on. I used to go and feed the birds in the garden.

And they would come and I would clear my path and put some seed down wearing the same coat they were in the summer. I don't read of the robins putting on a fleece going, it's a bit parky tonight.

[16:28] And they have the same feathers as they have in summer. And they're so small and here's me kind of homemade soup David and we'll have some extra toast kind of get the fat layers up because it's jolly cold out there.

They just bounce around. Who's made them? My father's gentleness has made them great. We have wood pigeons in our garden.

We have a fairly large garden. We have wood pigeons. We also have foxes. And they're a nuisance that distilled God's creation. Do you know, the main feather of a wood pigeon which I can hold in my hand has a million parts.

And I can hold it like that and go, that's a million parts. You think of one thing that we as human beings can make with a million parts that is so light you can hold it up and just go, God's gentleness.

has made them great. And I love, I love bumblebees. They're incredible things. Do you know, when you fly, an aeroplane can only carry 25% of its body weight.

[17:44] And I'm not the best of flyers. Folks say, I know you're praying, Pastor, I'll pray for you. And I say, go and pray for me. Pray for the pilot. He's flying it, I'm just a passenger. And an aeroplane can only carry 25% of its body weight.

A bumblebee carries its entire body weight. That's like a boring 747 going off down the runway with a boring 747 strapped on top.

And not only just kind of getting off the ground, when it's fully loaded with all its pollen, it's dive bombing, in and out, bumbling around. And if you built an aeroplane on the same dimensions as a bumblebee, the wings would be so stumpy.

Nothing would ever happen. It would be kind of, as a child drawn, this, it's unrealistic. And this incredible creature which if we designed and put engines on could not take off, God gently makes a little creature that we can hold on our thumb that can carry its body weight and dive and do a wonderful work and take off with such little wings.

I could carry on talking like this all night. I love it. Because it's my father's world. And I don't know if you've noticed this. I love hymnology.

[19:08] If you look at the hymns of Charles Wesley, and I love the hymns of Charles Wesley, they're always talking about redemption, redemption, redemption. The thing about Isaac Watts' hymns is that they always talk about creation and redemption.

He has the balance right. Thank God for redemption. But also, thank God for creation. And we could keep bringing in creation galore.

For example, like water. To my understanding, water is the only liquid that freezes from the top down. And that's very clever of God.

Because it means as soon as it gets cold, the water freezes and everything below the line is warm. If water froze from the bottom up, as every other liquid does, you'd have big problems.

Is that lucky? Whew. No. That's God's gentleness. I haven't even mentioned ourselves.

[20:13] And David said in Psalm 139, Lord, we are fearful and wonderfully made. I once heard a man in my last church, he came and spoke for an hour on the human eye.

It doesn't matter, but when it comes together you go, wow. And also this book is not only able to save and sustain, it's able to show us just how amazing the Lord is.

So what do I mean by that? The Bible is made up of 66 books written by 39 men, or 40 men, sorry, 39 Jews, one Gentile, 40 men in 8 different countries in 3 different languages over 1500 years.

[26 : 05] And there are thousands of stories, but there's just one storyline. And I remember at the age of 10 being asked by my uncle and auntie, what do you want for your Christmas, David?

I think I shocked them. I said, I would like a Bible. And at the age of 10, I don't know how, but whether it was through imbibing it from somebody, but I got hold of this concept of reading four chapters a day.

And if you do that, you read your way through the Old Testament once, and the New Testament and the Psalms twice. And there I was as a 10-year-old boy starting to read God's Word. I'm still reading it.

All those years later. And it takes my breath away at how powerful, how accurate, and how God can pinpoint things just like that.

You don't mess with God's Word. And the whole of Scripture says, listen, it's God's gentleness in putting us together that has made us great.

[27 : 11] But there's a third area. It's called people. When I look at the way that God has dealt with people, if I could bring people here, they would say, it's God's gentleness that has made me great.

Let me just bring a few people here. Take, for example, Adam. I have every confidence I shall meet Adam in glory. Adam amuses me because he just woke up married.

Have you seen that in Scripture? Never did any courting, never had a mother-in-law. Just woke up and he was married. That's interesting. And then, you know what happened? He blew it.

It's all there in Genesis. And God laid down the law that if you partake of this tree, you will die. And if I could bring Adam here, and what an interesting occasion it's going to be when we meet him.

Adam would say to us, if we gave him the microphone, do you know, God had every reason to wipe me out there and then. He said, the soul that sins shall die.

[28 : 17] And I partook of that tree with my eyes wide open. But you know what happened? In gentleness, he slew an animal.

And he clothed my wife Eve and myself. And in grace, he gave us many, many years. And God's gentleness has made me who I am.

And then when you read through the history of the Old Testament, it's full of the children of Israel. Boy, how they strayed from the Lord. We know because he sent them judges and then prophets and more prophets and more prophets.

In fact, it gets quite repetitive. Dare I say, sometimes it gets weary thinking, not again. And yet, we have this great cry that comes out of the book of Hosea.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim? It's like a parent almost being infuriated by an incorrigible child saying, I've told you so many times, I don't know what more to do with you.

[29 : 23] I want to give you up, but I can't because you're mine. God could have so easily washed his hands of the nation of Israel, but what happened?

His gentleness kept Israel going. What about the New Testament? What about the woman caught in the act of adultery?

The law was quite explicit. Anyone who was caught in the act of adultery and she was caught and there were witnesses, then the law said quite categorically she must be stoned.

There's no getting away from it. And our Lord would have had every right to have said she's guilty. In fact, I actually know the name of the man she was coming to adultery with because they only brought the woman.

But my simple knowledge tells me it takes two to tango. So I was the man. It was a set-up job. But our Lord is the Lord. And he could have said, I'm sorry, my dear, you've broken the law.

[30 : 27] You know what the law is? You're living in the community of God's people. But what did he do? You know the story in John chapter 8. He said, let him who is without sin cast the first stone.

Don't think this means let him who thinks he is sinless cast the first stone. It means let him who is without guilt in this area cast the first stone.

And one by one they left. And then our Lord looked her in the eye and said, neither do I condemn you but go and sin no more.

He said, oh, he made light of sin. No. He knew in a matter of months he was going to the cross to pay for that woman's sin. He'd every right to say, you have broken God's law, you must die. I know it's a set up job but you were doing it. But his gentleness made her great. And she would probably come here with tears in her eyes saying, I thought I was finished.

[31 : 38] but his gentleness made me great. And then, oh, there's dear Simon Peter. How we thank God for Simon Peter.

There was a boy in school when I was in school called Kevin Anderson. How I thanked God for Kevin Anderson. Why? He always asked the dullest questions that I was thinking. I used to say in my heart, thank God Kevin's asked that because I wanted to ask it.

And the teacher would say, are you stupid Kevin? Does it come naturally or do you practice it? And we thank God for Simon Peter. Why? Because he was always kind of doing those wrong things as we understand and opening his mouth and putting his foot in it.

You know the kind of situation. They'd been fishing all night in Luke chapter 5 and caught nothing. And then what happened? Well, the Lord said, cast the net on the other side of the boat and they did. And the net was breaking. And when Peter realized it was the Lord, he said, depart from me, oh Lord, I'm a sinful man.

And the Lord could have said, Peter, that's bang on. That's the first time I've heard you speak any sense. Goodbye. But what did Jesus say to Simon Peter?

[32 : 48] Peter, don't be afraid. From now on, you will catch men. If you read through the life of Simon Peter, I only just saw this the other week.

It just shocked me. Ten times in the life of Simon Peter he is rebuked. Ten times. Most of those are by the Lord. The last big one is when the Apostle Paul put him down in the church in Antioch because of the hypocrisy that was going on in Peter's life to do with the Gentiles and the Jews and eating and so on.

But ten times he was rebuked publicly and put down. And every time he was wronged. And if we could bring Simon Peter he would say, do you know, I just want to tell you folks, the only reason why I'm here is that God's gentleness has made me great.

And then the soul of Tarsus. Do you know, the more I study the Apostle Paul, the more he takes my breath away.

We've had 2,000 years to reflect on Christianity so that when things get tough for us we go, well, hang on a minute. It was tough for Jonathan Edwards and it was just tough for John Wesley.

[34 : 11] And it was tough for William Perkins and we go right through history. Yeah, it was tough for Mary Slessor on the mission field so I understand this man was right at the very beginning. And people in the church began to turn on him.

Yeah? Wow. How painful that must have been for Paul. But Paul started out a blasphemer. He was also guilty of people's blood because he not only stood there when Stephen was being stoned and held their coats, but if you read elsewhere in his letters and the Acts of the Apostles, he was the cause of many believers going to prison and dying.

Have you ever thought about this? How would you cope if you were a widow in the church in Jerusalem? A widow because your husband is martyred and in walks all of Tarsus.

How would you cope with that? I love the quotation by C.S. Lewis. He said, Forgiveness is a wonderful idea until you have to forgive.

You know? And then when you have to do it, you want to throttle them. When it's someone else, now you must be patient and forgiving. Because it doesn't hurt you. But when it hurts you, and so here you are, you're in the church of Jerusalem.

[35 : 35] No wonder it says that when Paul eventually came to the church in Jerusalem, if you read it carefully in the Acts of the Apostles, they moved him on very quickly and it says, And then when he went back to Tarsus, the church in Jerusalem had rest.

And I thought to myself, What on earth is behind that sentence? Because you can imagine people's emotions are absolutely raw that here's the man who voted for my husband to die, who brought the letters.

By the way, think of all the blasphemies this man must have come out with about the Lord Jesus.

For he says in 1 Timothy, I was a blasphemer. If he was around today, he'd probably do a PowerPoint on how the Lord Jesus is not the Messiah.

Show you from the Old Testament. and then God met him. And I love this verse in 1 Corinthians. Paul said to the Corinthians, I am what I am by the grace of God.

And Paul could tell you, it's God's gentleness that has made me great. So there's creation. There's scripture. I could bring lots of people into the pulpit.

[36 : 49] It would be full. So full. I'd say, quick, take a collection. But there's one other thought. And that is you and me. And when you stop and think of God's gentleness to you and me, it takes my breath away.

Samuel Medley wrote this in one of his hymns. Why did he love me? I never can tell. Why did he suffer to save me from hell?

Nothing but infinite grace from above could have conceived such a story of love. Why? And when I think of how the Lord has been so gracious in my life, and you can probably echo the same, I just say, Lord, there's enough in me for you to say, Mr. Unshall, it's time we finished your days down here.

Come in. Your time is up. What is it the psalmist said? You have not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities.

And when I think of the grace of the Lord to me in gentleness, then it crushes me. Graham Kendrick has put it so well.

[38 : 24] Oh, Lord, your tenderness melting all my bitterness. Oh, Lord, I receive your love. Oh, Lord, your loveliness changing all my ugliness.

Oh, Lord, I receive your love. And when you realize it's God's gentleness that has kept us alive and brought us to this very point, does it not bring you to your knees and say, Lord, thank you that your strength when it comes to me is under control.

There's a wonderful hymn by Charles Wesley and I don't always disagree with Mr. Wesley.

Sometimes I think he's way off beam. Surprising how people, even in reformed churches, sing Wesley's theology that is way off beam and you say to them, could you explain that to me, please? Well, I don't know. It's in the end book. One is a classic. One is, and can it be? Yeah, some of the statements there, but I don't want to digress there. You know, emptied himself of all but love. You don't believe that, surely.

You don't believe that Christ emptied himself with everything except love? That's an interesting expression. Also, he mentions, in vain the firstborn seraph tries.

[39 : 47] I've always asked, who on earth is the firstborn seraph? And how did he try? It's good to kind of look at these things and think, what on earth is he talking about?

Listen to this. Depth of mercy. Can there be mercy yet reserved for me? Can my God his wrath forbear, me the chief of sinners spare?

That's fine. That's great. I have long withstood his grace, long provoked him to his face. That's fine. Would not listen to his calls, grieved him by a thousand foes.

I say, Mr. Wesley, a thousand, you're way off being. More like ten thousand. I have grieved not a thousand times, ten thousand times. And yet, God, in gentleness, he comes back, and in the words of Psalm 23, he restores my soul.

And I guess he's done the same to you. And that's why I love to come and gather around the Lord's table. And the words of the liturgy of the Baptist communion book, I think it's beautiful.

[41 : 10] We come not because we must, but because we may. And we come not because we are righteous, but because he is righteous.

That's gentleness. And you see this personified so clearly, and I close with this, in the parable of the prodigal. I love that parable.

It's an amazing, amazing thing. I did a conference a while ago, and just spent eight nights going through that. It's so Jewish, and when you understand its Jewish background, it all comes alive.

But let me just give you one thought. when the prodigal went into the far country, his father then divided his inheritance and gave it to the prodigal.

The word literally means in the Greek, he had to sell part of his assets to release the money. I mean, if you had two sons, and you were Jewish, then your eldest son always had two portions of the will, because he had the responsibility of looking after you.

[42 : 19] So that's what a double portion was. So if you had a very nice house and an acre of land, and your son says, Father, I want what's coming to me, the father has to downsize, because he's going to release the assets.

So the pain that the father went through to send his son into the far country, think of what this would do to the community. Have you heard what he's done? Have you heard what that boy's done? And so he goes into the far country, what happens?

The father looks for him, and when the father sees him coming, he runs to him, and he locks arms with him, and says, my boy, we shall walk through this village together.

Why? Because if you walk through this village on your own, your life will not be saved. You'll get abused, you'll probably get worse from the villagers, because in that kind of situation, community life is crucial.

You've heard of the expression from the Amish community of being shunned? You're ostracized because of what you've done to this community? This wife has wrecked the home, and he's gone off. And the father locks arms with him and says, son, we go through this village together.

[43 : 33] Can you picture the father and the prodigal coming back through the village and forth going, I can't believe it. After all, he did.

And there he is with the father. That's grace. And that's the God that we worship.

He saw me ruined by the fall. He loved me, notwithstanding all. His loving kindness, oh, how great.

And he came into this world after I wrecked it and cursed him. And he locked arms with me and said, son, this is for you. And over and over and over again, his gentleness has made me great.

What a wonderful God we have. what a wonderful God we have. Let's pray together. God Thank you.