

# A PEOPLE ALONE, by David Andrew

Is your preoccupation showing – and what is it?

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*For what great nation has a god as near to them as the LORD our God is near to us whenever we call on him?*  
(Deuteronomy 4:7)

**Our eternal God sees the end from the beginning; He has never had to adjust his plans. His timeless decrees are each enacted in mortal time without modification.** Consequently, when we see Him gather His recently liberated people at the foot of Sinai to receive the ‘Law through Moses’ we should not imagine the moment as some hastily conceived contingency plan necessitated by unexpected rebellion. Rather, it was the next eternally decreed phase in His education plan for a ‘parallel humanity’...

Lesson One had been a crash course in theology. Specifically, events leading up to their emancipation had provided at least ten points of contrast between the awesome deeds of their own invisible God and the utter impotence of Egypt’s multiple visible gods – including Pharaoh. A pattern had emerged very quickly. When God’s words came from Moses’ mouth... trembling was appropriate.

## Isolation for the greater good

It had always been Yahweh’s intention to create “a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations”. (Numbers 23:9) But anything more opposed to elitism or racism you could not imagine. These were Abraham’s descendants, **the family chosen by God to bless all the families of the earth.**

The Great Commission placed by Jesus upon His Church is in unbroken continuity with God’s covenant promise to Father Abraham. “Go into all the world and make disciples...” was not intended to initiate a census of church members. Unless evangelism is partnered with the divine education programme we call discipling, it is little more than head counting. The good news is too readily snatched away from those who are not soon taught to live in it – and that’s not good news. The fact is that Christian disciples are grafted – by grace – into that ‘people dwelling alone’. And given that this separation is a benign decree of God to rescue all mortals from sin’s slavery – new believers are automatically in the crosshairs of Hell’s snipers. The evil one knows that, under God’s direction, mortal holiness is progressive and the intended outcome is a disciple who bears an increasing likeness to Jesus – Hell’s nemesis... multiplied!

The Hebrew people were always intended to be not only a separated nation but a separated humanity – a race within the race, set apart by God’s Word. Can you hear Jesus’ pray: “*Sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth*”? (John 17:17) And here’s the proof that election is not elitism... “*I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.*” (John 17:14-16) Even as human society wrestles with the requirement of **clinical isolation** to combat the threat from COVID-19, the people of God need urgently to understand that it is only safe for us to be ‘in’ the world, if we are not ‘of’ the world. The sanctifying effect of the Word of God is to produce in us a **spiritual isolation** with a two-fold purpose: to shield believers from infection by the mindset and values of our surrounding culture and **by this means** to protect the clarity and authority of our testimony to Jesus Christ. Holiness is not elitism, it is ‘social distancing’ for the honour of God’s Name and for His intended greater good of humanity. The ‘distance’ is measured, not in metres or shopping trolleys – far less in superiority – but in the message of our lips and lives. Christians who wander into worldly paths put themselves and others at risk. Stay at ‘Home’ with Father and save lives (there is a second death).

**Stay ‘at Home’  
with Father  
and save lives**

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Unit One in God's second lesson plan for His lately emancipated slaves is ominously headed: 'Favoured and Trembling'. "Worship the LORD in the splendour of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!" (Psalm 96:9) They had been led out of captivity by a man who had learned – at the 'not-burning-bush' – that it was possible to know God's unmerited favour and yet tremble in his awesome presence. Now, on the shaking slopes of Sinai, they too would receive favour... and learn to tremble. Terrifying as was this first direct encounter with their God, Moses saw this as unique favour and, many years later, insisted that they realise their privilege: "...what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:7-8)

### **Educated to educate**

**We fatally misunderstand the giving of the Law unless we see it, not as divine imposition, but divine provision, not 'burden' but 'blessing'.** The Ten Commandments is not a checklist by which mortals can tick off their self-congratulatory progress to heaven. The Living God has made such progress impossible – because the standard is too high and only divine generosity answers the need. Those who were 'under the Law' were given not the slightest hope of using the Law to establish their own righteousness. Had that been possible, they would have needed no priesthood and no sacrifices – but they did. The priesthood and the means of atonement were also God's provision. Boasting was excluded even in the Old Covenant.

When the vicious Ninevites needed the merciful preaching of Jonah it was because (in God's own words) they didn't "know their right hand from their left". Ignorance was the root of their national degradation. At Sinai, God began to teach His people which hand was which...

The Ten Commandments were not only prescriptive; they were also descriptive. "Thou shalt not..." described the intended shape of a nation that would be marked out as different – a visual aid of God's wisdom to the marvelling pagans. Obedience to God's commands, said Moses "...will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'" (Deuteronomy 4:6) And that's the whole point: OUTREACH. God never intended that Israel would have a monopoly on education but that Israel's educated condition would cause an unthinking idolatrous world, driven by feelings to begin to THINK. The ancient saying that 'whom the gods would destroy they first make mad' is bad theology but sharp observation. The nation Satan would destroy he first makes ignorant – madness follows close behind. Britain's history from our primitive woad-faced ancestors is inexplicable apart from Christianity. In the life-and-freedom threatening 1940s prayer to God was reckoned by the government to be an aspect of national security. Newspapers routinely used the word 'miracle' in their reporting of the war's high drama. In the life-threatening, commerce-shaking, freedom-restricting first half of 2020, Almighty God's national profile is all but invisible. Fear of a microbe has replaced the fear of the Lord.

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Pagan western nations need once again to be educated about the unique and awesome greatness of Our God – but how are these lessons to be supplied? Answer: **society needs a new preoccupation – or it needs to encounter God's parallel society which has a totally different preoccupation.. with Jesus Christ.** Why was it that Jacob's freed families who left Egypt could be described as a 'mixed multitude'? It was because some Egyptians and other races had witnessed the humiliation of Egypt's fake gods, impotent magicians and foolish leaders – and decided to throw in their lot with the clear winners... God's Word insists that 'in Christ Jesus' we who believe **have already won** – but only on the ground of Calvary. If we would rescue fellow sinners from hell's ever-present cliff-edge, we must determine to bring them safely home via the Cross. Like ancient Israel, they must learn to tremble about their sin before they will ever rejoice in their Saviour. Sadly

the 'church' that is favoured and tirelessly wheeled out by the media to speak for us all is careful to offend no-one except God. But offence is crucial to the rescue. The Cross offends our dismissive attitude towards sin. God's only remedy humiliates our self-reliance but also prepares us to sing *Amazing Grace* – and look amazed! When Jesus Christ defeated death, He instantly criminalised those whose verdict had criminalised Him – and immediately offered salvation even to His enemies. What a Saviour!

From Sinai onwards, Israel was divinely intended to be out of step with neighbouring culture. As to their humanity, Abraham's descendants and pagan Gentiles would be "all in this together". As to light and wisdom for living... they could never be on the same page. Whenever the chosen people are on the same page as world culture, the signal is that Yahweh is just another man-made deity with no original ideas who merely requires his worshippers to copy popular religious practices: child sacrifice, cult prostitution, necromancy and witchcraft. For this gross violation of the third commandment, God sent Israel into exile from the Promised Land to live amongst the pagans they had copied.

It will be clear from this that when Israel was commanded not to "take the Lord's Name in vain" – it had less to do with cleaning up street language (though it includes that – Lev 24:11f.) than with how God is REPRESENTED BY HIS PEOPLE. The often heard "I blame the parents" shows that children's behaviour can misrepresent their parents' values. The force of the Hebrew in the third commandment is that the uniquely Holy Name of Yahweh must not be voided by His children. This deeper meaning than mere 'swearing' is supported by Ezekiel 36:20,23.

### Gloriously out of step

Enoch preceded Moses by about two millennia and his biography is a teasing one-liner, but we can deduce that his chosen path was sufficiently different from the people of his day to merit special mention. He "walked with God; then he was no more because God took him away" (Genesis 5:24) The original language implies not a one-off encounter with God but a 'moving about' in God's company. Enoch's lifestyle was God-conscious, God-revering and, we are invited to surmise, a contrast to his careless society. Humanly speaking, they were "all in [something] together". Spiritually, Enoch was gloriously out of step.

Much human kindness has been released in response to the pandemic – and why not? Christian or non-Christian, we all bear something of the image of our Maker; and God is love. But the Indian pastor who recently returned home empty-handed to his hungry family from the government's food bank discovered that we are not "all in this together" in quite the same way. **He was refused food unless he renounced his faith in Jesus.** He chose hunger and bore His Lord's Name with honour. We bless the Lord for Christian agencies that supply the care that was withheld...

**Can you imagine the impact of this brother's testimony?** No doubt the Hindu nationalists enjoyed their moment of 'victory' – but how many other poor Indians began to wonder how Jesus Christ could be so special that a man would choose hunger rather than deny his Lord? If we have ears to hear, our brother is telling us comfortable westerners that the "people who dwell alone" are never alone – and our frightened society needs to meet our Companion...