

# "Decent, Godless People"

By Thomas A. Davis

There in the midst of the paragraph I was scanning was one of those unforgettable, pithy phrases, almost like a slogan, which occasionally catches one's eye and mind with its verity and aptness and luminosity: "decent, godless people."

How well it seemed to fit a certain class—the morally correct people who wrong no one, commit no crime, work honestly, pray assiduously, attend church faithfully, and perhaps say, "I am doing the best I can. I think I have as good a chance as anyone." Some of the group may even hold church offices, but are godless in the sense that they have no real experience with God.

You may stand such people alongside others who make no profession of Christianity, who, in fact, would be horrified at the thought of sitting in a church pew, or even angry at the suggestion, and find little or nothing in their lives of great or meaningful contrast. Infidelity, or even heathenism, has cultivated specimens in many respects as admirable. Both types, the "decent, godless" professor of religion and the "decent, godless" infidel, are like cut flowers. "They carry the bloom of the earth in which they grew, the perfume of the plant on which they blossomed. But it is only for a moment. They are broken off from the parent stem."

## A Change Comes to Saul

Think of Paul in the days when he was known as Saul of Tarsus—an eminently decent man, a member of the Sanhedrin, the acme of pharisaical virtue. Read his own description of himself:

"If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" (Phil. 3:4-6).

But something happened to the young man Saul. He beheld a great light, and in the heavenly brightness that which he thought was lily-white righteousness suddenly appeared tarnished and worthless. His decency wilted like the cut flower, and he realized clearly for the first time that he had no connection with the life-giving parent stem.

The Bible bears record of many such people, and Jesus had contact with not a few. In fact the Jewish nation as a whole was composed of "decent, godless people." Were they not Abraham's seed, honored by God as a chosen, separate nation above every other people upon the earth? In such thoughts they found room for great spiritual complacency.

One moonless night a veiled figure made its way silently through the sleeping streets of Jerusalem. With purposeful steps it passed through the city gate, down into the shadowy valley, across brook Kidron, and up the starlit slopes of the Mount of Olives. There Nicodemus found the object of his search, Jesus. And as they talked Nicodemus began to see something of his real condition. He began to see himself as a decent, but godless, man.

"We may have flattered ourselves, as did Nicodemus, that our life has been upright, that our moral character is correct, and think that we need not humble the heart before God, like the common sinner: but when the light from Christ shines into our souls, we shall see how impure we are; we shall discern the selfishness of motive, the enmity against God, that has defiled every act of life. Then we shall know that our own righteousness is indeed as filthy rags, and that the blood of Christ alone can cleanse us from the defilement of sin, and renew our hearts in His own likeness."—*Steps to Christ*, pp. 32, 33.

The church books list some who, like Nicodemus, have no vision of the real meaning of Christianity. The solid symmetry of the message appeals to them;

they are intellectually persuaded and take the necessary steps to become church members. But they emerge from the baptismal font unchanged, to take their place in the church family as members "in good and regular standing," but being merely morally respectable. They have experienced no profound change of character; they have not Christ within.

Another type of "decent, godless" church member is sometimes to be found in the group who are born into a Seventh-day Adventist family. They learn the message in the home and church, the Sabbath school and church school. The theory of the truth becomes an integral part of their thinking. It is only natural that when they reach the proper age they are baptized, but the baptism may be little more than a form. They are recorded as church members, but are unconverted.

Like Paul these persons are, in a sense, "free born." But often it is the person who, like the chief captain, can say, "With a great sum obtained I this freedom," who finds his way into the church through a tangle of difficulties, and with much travail of soul, who has realized his great need of Christ, and has experienced His presence.

Again it is very easy, on the road of daily Christian living, to slide from the solid surface of a genuine experience into the well-worn rut of professionalism. We become "weary in well doing," or take our attention from the road for a moment, and slip into a rut so easily that

R+H 1953

OUT AND OVER →

## Tarry Long Upon the Mountain

By Paul W. Kemper

Tarry long upon the mountain,  
Talk to Him in prayer,  
Thank Him for His saving grace  
And ever-loving care;  
Ask Him for the strength you need  
To fill your life with power,  
And He who governs suns and moons  
Will hold you hour by hour.

Tarry long upon the mountain,  
Climb into its sacred peak;  
And there you'll see the Saviour  
And receive the strength you seek.  
He'll anoint your eyes with eyesalve  
And your lips with living fire;  
What a thrill to speak His goodness  
And lift men from sinking mire.

Climb up higher in the mountain,  
Only there you'll see His face,  
And with holy, loving-kindness  
You'll behold amazing grace.

Grace abounding and o'erflowing,  
Mighty, wonderful, and free.  
He, your Saviour and Redeemer,  
You, His chosen child can be.

O dear friend of mine, He calls you  
To the mountaintop of prayer,  
To the place of sweet communion—  
Meet the blessed Saviour there.  
Heavenly power awaits your asking,  
Divine strength to meet the need.  
There you'll catch a glimpse of heaven  
If you'll pray and cry and plead.

What a joy and sweet communion  
May be yours and mine each day  
If we learn the blessed secret  
Of the prayer life on our way.  
Oh, 'tis sweet to talk to Jesus  
On the mountaintop of prayer.  
'Tis so sweet to hear Him whisper,  
"Come up higher; I am here."

we hardly notice it. There driving seems so much easier. You don't have to be on guard nearly so much. And, anyway, the road appears to be going in the same direction as before. So very soon we forget that we are in a spiritual rut, if we ever recognized the fact at all, and we join the other "decent, godless people."

It is very easy to get into such a condition, so easy that we need to be constantly checking whether we are up on the road or in the rut.

"Determine to know the worst of your case. Ascertain if you have an inheritance

on high. Deal truly with your own soul. Remember that a church without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, will Jesus present to His Father."—*Testimonies*, vol. 1, p. 163.

"Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom," is a political axiom that applies doubly in the spiritual realm. Unsleeping guard must be kept, or the enemy steals through the gates of the soul. The bulwarks must be kept in good repair. The weapons of our warfare must be kept bright and keen for earnest battle in the struggle with sin and self.