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### SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

#### STEADFASTNESS OF LIFE

by Rev. R. C. Todd

LESSON: Rev. Chaps. 1 - 7

Around the end of the first century, Christians throughout the Roman Empire were enduring bitter persecution under the Emperor Domitian. The origin of this persecution lay in the demand made by the Roman state that the peoples of all its dominions render tribute to Caesar in the form of worship at the temples dedicated to the divine person of the emperor. Worship of other gods was tolerated; but the worship of Caesar was required as a declaration of political loyalty. Christians refused to share in what they regarded as pagan worship and so were persecuted as political criminals. The persecution varied in intensity, according to the zeal of local officials in enforcing the imperial edicts; but everywhere the followers of Jesus were in danger of losing both property and life. Those who, for one reason or the other, disliked or hated the Christians such as the Jews and certain pagan sects, often took advantage of the situation by causing riots for which Christians were blamed, or by demanding the penalty for not observing the worship of the Emperor.

During this period of trial, John, who himself was suffering for his faith as an exile on the penal island of Patmos, wrote a "tract for the times" in apocalyptic form. Today, probably he would have written it as a novel. It is full of strange figures and fancies, not easily understood today, but familiar to the people to whom John wrote in the Churches, and their use probably helped to deceive the Roman censors.

The purpose of the Book of Revelation is clear, however, and it carries a message of timeless importance to the Church. Its author seeks to strengthen the persecuted with the conviction that the pocal struggle in which they are engaged is a part of the vast and age-old conflict between good and evil; and that the final outcome was assured by the character and purpose and power of God. The preponderance of material force might be on the side of the evil; but mightier than

the resources of a great empire are the resources of God, and in the end they must carry the day. The glorious Head of the Church would bring help in the time of need and final vindication would come and Caesar's edicts would be unable any more to scatter families or cause torture or death.

This week's lesson contains a passage of the book which was written particularly to the Christians in Smyrna. (Rev. 2:8-11). Smyrna was a city devoted to Caesar worship and in such a place persecution was bound to be severe and unto the death. Polycarp, first bishop of Smyrna suffered martyrdom in 166 in the stadium of that city. On that occasion the Jews of the city—and there was a large Jewish population, joined with the pagans in clamouring that the Christian leader be cast to the lions or burned to death. He was burned, and although his death took place on a sabbath, the Jews were the foremost in carrying faggots into the stadium. (see Rev. 2:9).

It has been said that more Christians have died for their faith in Europe and Asia during the past ten years than during the persecutions under the Roman Empire. And it should be noted that in our present day world, too, the persecution of Christians has usually been linked with the pagan claims of the state. The Christians of Germany were persecuted and many perished in concentration camps, because they refused to admit that the Nazi state had the power to dictate to the individual conscience in matters of faith, and in matters of right and wrong. In our day, Christian and Jew have been persecuted together, for today both realize that they must stand together in resisting the evil influence of paganism.

Wherever the state sets itself up as being above the criticism of Christian conscience and the Word of God, persecution is bound to follow. And the end of the war has not brought an end to this threat. Last fall a young Protestant stood outside a downtown Presbyterian Church in Argentina, distributing leaflets inviting people to come to the service. He was approached by one of dictator Peron's men, who said, "Come with me." The invitation was made more pressing by him showing a revolver he carried in his pocket. Not thirty yards away a police officer was directing traffic, but the young man knew it

was useless to appeal to him for protection. He was taken to Nationalist headquarters, and there questioned as to whether he was a Jew or a Communist. "Neither," he said, "I am a Christian. No matter what you do to me, I shall forgive you and try to love you." Apparently this disconcerted the inquisitors. They took his leaflets away, threatened him, and let him go. It is said that his arrest and inquisition was due to the instigation of another religious body "which say they are Christians but are not, but are the synagogue of Satan." Rev. 2:9, 10).

This case suggests the kind of response that a Christian must make to the threats and persecution of a pagan society. Though a pagan state does not intend to implement the laws of God which this "pious" group would have all men obey for their own good, the Christian himself must obey them. There are some forms of coercion and social pressure just as difficult to resist as a revolver carried in the pocket; and some of them are not unknown in Canada. Nor is the synagogue of Satan unknown.

In their conflict with Caesar and the evil, Christians can count on the presence and help of Him who is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, who was crucified and is alive for evermore. Jesus himself knew death as the price of loyalty to the cause of God; from it he arose in the triumph of the resurrection. If Christians now share in his suffering, they will likewise share in his glory.

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### THE DYING YEAR

The winds of chill December,  
Wail o'er the dying year,  
And tonight fond hearts remember  
The boys who to them were dear;  
Who, self and self-interests scorning  
(Life for them had scarcely begun)  
Marched over the hills of their  
morning,  
To the rattling roll of the drum.

'Neath far-off skies, now, are they  
sleeping,  
Jungle and sea and plain  
Are we their ideals keeping,  
Or have they died in vain.

Still, fiercely a conflict rages  
Profits and losses and gains,  
Nations in feuds engaging  
Dividing the hills and the plains.  
Peace seems as remote as ever  
In spite of the promises made,  
It would seem not much honest  
endeavor,  
Mistrust and envy instead.

Unrest, must you be with us ever  
Haunting each night and day,  
Must we lose your company never,  
Or are you here to stay?  
Peace, seems remote as ever  
Hate, record of tragic pages  
Was it that only you  
Could live from the far back ages,  
So strong is your sinne and thow.

Envy and greed and malice  
Can it be that only they,  
Vengeful of heart and callous,  
Have triumphed over decay.  
There is good in each man and na-  
tion,  
Will it ever on earth prevail,  
And bring to each rank and station,  
Peace instead of travail.

Could we not some forbearance  
borrow  
Speak softly in love's sweet tone,  
Lose some of our dread of tomorrow  
Regain some trust that seems gone,  
The music of peace and its gladness  
Would vibrate in hearts again,  
Healing the hurts and sadness,  
With the notes of a sweet refrain.

Mistrust and greed could we banish  
Many ills that assail us here,  
Would from the old earth vanish  
Along with the dying year.

—B. T., Georgetown.

— LIONS CHRISTMAS TREE,  
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20th.