
THE RAPTURE OF THE CHURCH AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

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The Didache (possibly before A.D. 100): The author of this work substituted “church” for “elect” where Jesus spoke of gathering together his elect after the Tribulation (Matt. 24:29-31; Mark 13:24-27)

So let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom [chapter 9]

Remember, Lord, Thy Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in Thy love, and gather it from the four winds, sanctified for Thy kingdom which Thou hast prepared for it [chapter 10]

Barnabas (A.D. 100): The final stumbling-block approaches . . . [here the author begins to describe the beast or antichrist]. We take earnest heed in these last days; for the whole [past] time of your faith will profit you nothing, unless now in this wicked time we also withstand coming sources of danger, as becometh the sons of God. That the Black One may find no means of entrance [The Epistle of Barnabas, chapter 4]

Justin Martyr (A.D. 110-165): The man of apostasy, who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful deeds on the earth against us the Christians . . . [Dialogue with Trypho, chapter 110]

Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202): Tradition says that Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp who was a disciple of John the apostle. And they [the ten kings] shall lay Babylon waste, and burn her with fire, and shall give their kingdom to the beast, and put the Church to flight. After that they shall be destroyed by the coming of our Lord [Against Heresies 5.26.1]

But he [John] indicates the number of the name now [the mark of the Beast], that when this man comes we may avoid him, being aware who he is [Against Heresies 5.30.4]

For all these and other words were unquestionably spoken in reference to the resurrection of the just, which takes place after the coming of Antichrist, and the destruction of all nations under his rule; in [the times of] which [resurrection] the righteous shall reign in the earth [Against Heresies 5.35.1]

Tertullian (A.D. 145-220): He equates Paul’s description of the rapture of the church in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 with Daniel’s description of the second coming. For we shall, according to the apostle, be caught up into the clouds to meet the Lord [even the Son of man, who shall come in the clouds, according to Daniel] and so shall we ever be with the Lord [Against Marcion 3.25]

And that the beast Antichrist with his false prophet may wage war on the Church of God . . . Since, then, the Scriptures both indicate the stages of the last times, and concentrate the harvest of the Christian hope in the very end of the world [On the Resurrection of the flesh, chapter 25]

Now the privilege of this favor [to be clothed with immortality] awaits those who shall at the coming of the Lord be found in the flesh, and who shall, owing to the oppressions of the time of Antichrist, deserve by an instantaneous death, which is accomplished by a sudden change, to become qualified to join the rising saints; as he writes to the Thessalonians: [He goes on to quote 1 Thess. 4:15-17, On the Resurrection of the Flesh, chapter 41]

Hermas (A.D. 160): Happy are ye who endure the great tribulation that is coming on, and happy are they who shall not deny their own life [The Shepherd of Hermas, Vision 2:2]

Now some have seen a pre-tribulation rapture in the following passage: Go, therefore, and tell the elect of the Lord His mighty deeds, and say to them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation that is coming. If then ye prepare yourselves, and repent with all your heart, and turn to the Lord, it will be possible for you to escape it, if your heart be pure and spotless, and ye spend the rest of the days of your life in serving the Lord blamelessly [Vision 4:2]

However, if we keep reading we see that the way of escape is by protection through the Tribulation: For as gold is tested by fire, and thus becomes useful, so are you tested who dwell in it. Those, therefore, who continue steadfast, and are put through the fire, will be purified by means of it. For as gold casts away its dross, so also will ye cast away all sadness and straitness, and will be made pure so as to fit into the building of the tower. But the white part is the age that is to come, in which the elect of God will dwell, since those elected by God to eternal life will be spotless and pure.

Wherefore cease not speaking these things into the ears of the saints. This then is the type of the great tribulation that is to come. If ye wish it, it will be nothing [Vision 4:3]

However, this is not a doctrinal work but is the record of a vision which Hermas experienced. Here a woman is telling him these things which he is in turn recording. This entire book is riddled with very strange teachings.

Hippolytus (170-236): Now, concerning the tribulation of the persecution which is to fall upon the Church from the adversary, John also speaks thus: “And I saw a great and wondrous sign in heaven . . .” That refers to the one thousand two hundred and threescore days [the half of the week] during which the tyrant is to reign and persecute the Church [Treatise on Christ and Antichrist, chapters 60-61]

Cyprian (A.D. 200-258): With the exhortation of His fore-seeing word, instructing, and teaching, and preparing, and strengthening the people of His Church for all endurance of things to come, He predicted and said that wars, and famines, and earthquakes, and pestilences would arise in each place . . . as the Lord Himself promises, saying, “But when ye see all these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is at hand” [Treatise 7.2]

The day of affliction has begun to hang over our heads, and the end of the world and the time of Antichrist to draw near, so that we must all stand prepared for the battle . . . A severer and a fiercer fight is now threatening [Epistle 55:1]

Victorinus (third or fourth century): Victorinus wrote the first known commentary on the book of Revelation. Notice how he expects the church to see these events in his comments on 7:2: He speaks of Elias the prophet, who is the precursor of the times of Antichrist, for the restoration and establishment of the churches from the great and intolerable persecution [Commentary on the Apocalypse of John 7:2]

Augustine (354-430): But he who reads this passage [Daniel 12], even half asleep, cannot fail to see that the kingdom of Antichrist shall fiercely, though for a short time, assail the Church before the last judgment of God shall introduce the eternal reign of the saints [The City of God, Chapter 23]