

## “Star Wars: The Mission”

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I do want to encourage you this morning to open your Bible to two passages of scripture in the New Testament: the book of Revelation, chapter 7 and also the book of Romans, chapter 11. If you are one of those first time guests or visitors or for some reason you haven't been with us during the summer season, we come today to what I like to call “Caboose Sunday.” This is the end, the train is stopping today. We have been going through the book of Revelation for approximately three months hitting the highlights, so to speak. And this is the end of our study through the book of Revelation.

And you may be wondering to yourself, “Why is it that the end is actually in chapter 7 because Revelation has 22 chapters in it?” One of the things that we have done in our study of the book of Revelation is this: much like the Star Wars saga, what we know as that original movie in the 1970s was actually the fourth out of six stories. I believe one of the reasons the Star Wars saga is so enthralling to us is because you actually start in the middle, go to the end, and then work back to the beginning again. We've taken kind of the same strategy to the book of Revelation but let me go ahead and share with you honestly that we did not do this just because Star Wars did it; we didn't do it just because George Lucas did it.

The reason we approached the book of Revelation in the manner in which we did or in the chronology we did was because I wanted to end on today's message. I didn't want to end on the New Heaven, the New Earth and the New Jerusalem. I didn't want to end on the final judgment. So we've looked at the great tribulation, the antichrist, the millennium, the second coming, Armageddon and all those concepts, and gone all the way to the New Heaven, the New Earth and the New Jerusalem and then we worked our way back. And we finish today in chapter 7 with a passage of scripture as we will see in just a moment that doesn't have a necessary timeframe around it; it's what we

call a parenthetical and I'll discuss what that means in a moment. But it also discusses one of the most famous concepts in the book of Revelation and end times studies: this famous "144,000." What is this group? Who is this group?

Before we come to chapter 7, one of the very important things that must be discussed with you is why I have such fervor for the book of Revelation. Many of you have come up to me the last couple of months and said, "You just seem like you're in the zone. You seem like this is where you love to be." Understand that my passion for the last book of the Bible, my passion for end times, my passion for studying the concepts that we've studied actually, as many passions do, come out of a sordid history, so to speak.

I know that I'm not the eldest in the room; I know that I haven't seen all that many of you have seen, but I had the unfortunate or fortunate privilege of growing up as a young child and an early preteen and teenager in some tumultuous days in our American history. I know it wasn't the movement of the sixties and the rioting, but I think all of us would confess that the decade of the seventies and the early eighties internationally, when it comes to global affairs, was a very tense time. No, I was not here for the Cuban missile crisis, but you may be surprised to find out that the early 1980s was actually the closest we ever came to nuclear war with our Cold War enemy, the Russians. I never knew life as a young child away from the Cold War, whether it was the Iran hostage situation or the Libyan invasion or all the things associated with the Cold War. It was a life that if you watched the news or if you heard adults talking, it was very confusing and disturbing at times.

And there was an event in my life that forever changed me. I was in sixth grade when one of our teachers had us break up into small groups to do a group project. We were to research the dimensions and all the necessary items and build a scale model of a nuclear bomb shelter. Now as a twelve or thirteen year old, imagine what goes through your mind when you're going to school every day thinking you may not wake up tomorrow; when you wake up every day and watch the news of all the invasions and conflicts and

begin to wonder what is happening around you. Now I was a believer in Jesus Christ; I had been saved for a couple of years but I was a baby, not only physically but also spiritually. As I saw the headlines, heard the news and went to school, I had this struggle within me and I had a hard time sleeping at night because I was paranoid about the world's events, everything that was happening around me. I felt literally that the sky could fall at any moment.

As those events began to progress, I went to a wise individual in my life and shared with this man my struggle. He asked me a question. "Have you ever read the book of Revelation?" I said, "No, I've heard about it. I know it's at the end of the Bible but I just don't think I can understand it." He said, "Why don't you read through the book of Revelation in one sitting and then come back and let's talk about it." I'll never forget the night that I sat down with the book of Revelation, went through it from front to back and didn't feel like I learned a thing because I couldn't understand anything. I went back to this mature friend and said, "Dave, I read it and I don't get it." He said, "Let me ask you a simple question. In the end, who won?" I said, "Well, God did." He said, "Exactly. Do you understand that in all these news stories you're seeing that they think they know how things are going to work but they really don't. They tell you that the world evaporates in a nuclear holocaust but not according to the book of Revelation. They say that if the doomsday clock strikes this Tuesday without a debt deal on the table the world is falling apart. Don't listen to them. When you look at the book of Revelation and study it, what you find out and discover is that most often what humanity says will be our demise, our end and our downfall, the Lord says, 'No, I'm in control. I'm in charge and I know how this thing ends.'"

You and I live in a world today that is saturated with negativity and news regarding humanity and our efforts. People are saying that if we continue driving cars the whole environment is just going to implode. We have all these scenarios that go back and forth. I know we could talk about this and that and what we should do, but understand that as we've studied through the book of Revelation all of those scenarios and hypotheses have

been devised by man. And God has given us the book of Revelation to say, “I am the One who opens the seven seals. I am the One who allows these things to occur. I am the One who ultimately has control of the end.”

Now saying that, the reason I wanted to end on Revelation, chapter 7 is that it is great to know and it is great to be able to talk about the antichrist in comparison to Jesus Christ, the millennium compared to the New Heaven and the New Earth. That’s great cerebral head-knowledge but ultimately we spend more time outside these walls than we do inside these walls. And we work with people, we live next door to people, we talk with people; friends, strangers and those who are moving into our community and we live in a world that is desperate to know the truth. So Revelation 7 isn’t just another concept as much as it is giving us our marching orders. What should we do now, tomorrow, with what we have learned as we’ve studied Revelation?

I’m going to read the whole chapter of Revelation 7 beginning in verse 1. “1And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. 2And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, 3Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. 4And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel. 5Of the tribe of Judah were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Reuben were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Gad were sealed twelve thousand. 6Of the tribe of Aser were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Nephthalim were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Manasses were sealed twelve thousand. 7Of the tribe of Simeon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Levi were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Issachar were sealed twelve thousand. 8Of the tribe of Zabulon were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Joseph were sealed twelve thousand. Of the tribe of Benjamin were

sealed twelve thousand. 9After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; 10And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. 11And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, 12Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honor, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen. 13And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? 14And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. 16They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. 17For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”

As we've discussed various subject matters in the book of Revelation, if there is one subject matter that we are probably familiar with, at least in numerical value, it is this famous 144,000. And as we will discuss throughout the course of this message there are various groups, both past and present, who claim to be a part of this group. And the thing that I am most interested in today is not just diagnosing who is or is not a part of the 144,000 and we will discuss that, but I am not so much interested in the number of them but in the manner in which they operate and live in the midst of the situation that God has them in.

If you are a first time guest or visitor, one of the things we have been doing is just taking a simple set of questions; who, what, when, where and why, and addressing these subject matters through the book of Revelation. So our first question today is very simple: who are the 144,000? Who are these people?

As I mentioned, various groups that come and knock on your door, typically in pairs or in threes, will claim that they are the 144,000. In history, not only have what we know as the Jehovah Witnesses but the early days of what we know as the Church of Christ, the Branch Davidians and many other groups have come and said we are that 144,000. You can debate, discuss and argue a lot but what we see here is this group of 144,000, first and foremost, is a very distinct group. What I mean by distinct group is it can't be one and also the other. I heard a message the other night where an individual said this group is symbolic of all of those who have believed on the Lord through the ages.

You know, every now and then the Lord takes a two-by-four to us theologically. And you know how I read through that list and it probably became tiresome to your ears. I was just praying as I read that I actually pronounced the names right; twelve thousand of this tribe and twelve thousand of that tribe. If the Lord tells us twelve times in a row that there were twelve thousand of twelve tribes then maybe we ought to realize that it's twelve thousand of the twelve tribes. It's like the Lord has just said how much more do I need to tell you? That being said, it's a very distinct group. It's not symbolic of somebody. In fact, if someone claims to be a part of the 144,000 then you can just simply say, "Which tribe are you from?" Hold on to that thought for just a moment.

It's also distinct and for the sake of time I'm not going to go over and read it but in Revelation, chapter 14 we also have an allusion to the 144,000 as well. And it also says there that all of them are men who have never had intimate relations with a woman. So an individual who is married can't be part of the 144,000 and a person who is a female can't be part of the 144,000.

So what is so distinct about this group as you study Revelation is that their number is precise: there are twelve thousand of all of the twelve tribes of Israel and in chapter 14 they are described as being male and lacking a marital relationship and all that goes with that. That is very distinct and different from the majority of people that you meet who

would claim to be a part of this group. It is a distinct group of people.

But it is also a very different group of people. I mentioned to you when someone comes to your door and they claim to be part of an organization, a group, or a religion that has this 144,000 corner on the market, there is one group of people who will come and say they are descendants from the tribe of Ephraim. Ephraim was one of the original twelve tribes of Israel, but if you will notice the list that I read, the twelve tribes here are actually a different listing than you have in the Old Testament. There are two tribes that are not listed in Revelation, chapter 7: the tribe of Dan and the tribe of Ephraim. If you go through and read your Old Testament history, they fell into apostasy and idolatry and when you get to the book of Revelation when the tribes resurface (and we're going to talk about that in just a moment) those two are not there. So we have modern groups that are great in number who will claim they are the tribe of Ephraim for the latter days, but the only problem is when you read the latter days in Revelation 7 there is no tribe of Ephraim that is listed.

There are two tribes that have replaced Ephraim and Dan: there is the tribe of Joseph and the tribe of Levi. In a moment we're going to discuss more about the tribe of Levi. That's significant because in your Old Testament history the Levites, the priests, the pastors, those who offer up the sacrifices for the people of Israel were not to be landowners, they didn't have what we would call a secular job. In fact, this is where we get the concept of a tenth or a tithe; it was given to the temple so they could have their basic needs met so they could live and function. But here they are numbered among the twelve where in the Old Testament there were in addition to, they were a special, set-aside tribe. So it's a distinct group of people but it's also a very different group of people.

That leads to the next question: what are the 144,000? We know kind of who they are; they're different and they're distinct, but what are they? The first thing you need to understand and you've seen in this passage, is that they are the resurrected tribal system. We live in a world today where people are fascinated, and rightfully so, with the nation or the entity we

know as Israel. It's just an amazing story. After 2,000 years of nomadic life, after 2,000 years of being disbursed, in 1917 the Balfour Declaration said they could go back to their homeland. In 1948 they received their independence as a separate country and were recognized by the world at large. In 1967 they understood they had possession of what we now know as Jerusalem. It's amazing that we live in a society and a world where everybody wants to claim that it's really not theirs but it's somebody else's. I hate to tell them, but if you read the Bible it is theirs; it is nobody else's.

But then the big debate is this: what really makes Israel, Israel? Is it just a piece of dirt? That's important. Is it the fact that they possess the holiest city on earth known as Jerusalem? What is it that really makes Israel, Israel? I think you have to go back to the father of the Israelites, Abraham. Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? It was Jacob who would give birth to what we know as these tribes, the tribal system of Israel, both that which was prominent in the Old Testament and resurfaces and resurrects here in Revelation 7. Their "physical father" was Jacob who was renamed Israel. Israel in totality is these twelve tribes.

And what we have seen over the last 2,000 years, and you can ask anybody, even the most faithful Jewish folks, which tribe do you come from and they can take a guess or two but they just don't know. Now that is nothing negative toward them. The importance here is in the book of Revelation, in the midst of this tribulation, what we see is that somehow, some way (and I've got a lot of theories and we don't have time for them today), the identity of these twelve tribes will resurface and be resurrected because here it very clearly says twelve thousand of each of these twelve tribes, though they are different from the original list, are sent out.

So what are they? They are the resurrection of this tribal order but also a realization of Romans 11:25-26. I want to read this passage of scripture to you. A very famous pastor of days gone by called this the most difficult passage of scripture in the Bible. Hopefully, we'll clear it up in two

minutes or less. By the way, for three chapters the Apostle Paul has been dealing with the fact that even though God called Israel and God called the tribal system that we, as Gentiles, could still be saved through Jesus Christ. Romans 11:25-27. “25For I would not, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in. 26And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: 27For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.”

I do not believe this passage of scripture says that everybody of a Jewish descent one day gets to go to Heaven. No, but what it does say is that the Lord worked through what we know as the Jewish people, the Israelites, throughout the Old Testament. There was, as a whole, a rejection of Jesus. When that Priest made the statement, “May His blood be on us and our children,” how much more of a rejection can you get? When you study the book of Acts in the New Testament, you see early in the stages of the church that it wasn’t necessarily the Jewish people as a whole that received the message of Jesus as it was the Gentiles. It says “until the fullness of the Gentiles come in and then. . .”

Do you know there are over 250 references in the book of Revelation to the Old Testament? Almost every illustration given that is of a positive nature goes back to the Old Testament and the history of the Israelite people, the Jewish people. The reason this is significant is that it says all Israel shall be saved. Who is Israel? Jacob; the twelve tribes. What do you have here in Revelation 7? You have a very distinct picture that of each one of these tribes. I don’t believe it is saying only twelve thousand of every tribe “was saved,” but I think it was saying of these tribes twelve thousand of these specific, distinct individuals were set aside for a very specific purpose that we’re going to talk about in just a moment.

So who are the 144,000? They are distinct and different. What are they? The resurrection of the tribal system and they are the realization that Romans 11:25-26

is going to happen just like it said. There is going to be a time when the time of the Gentiles (that's most of us) fades away and once again you have a prominence in the book of Revelation of working through the tribes and the Jewish people.

Which begs this very important question: when is this going to happen? After all, today we've got people running around everywhere claiming to be the 144,000. We've got people running around with all kinds of different concepts. Understand; this is a very unique time in history. In the book of Revelation as we've studied in its totality this summer season, there is this seven year period that we call the great tribulation. In verse 14 it says these are they which came out of the great tribulation. It makes it very specific that the group we're talking about is uniquely confined to the great tribulation. What that means is when you talk about the 144,000, unless you're in the middle of the great tribulation, you cannot have the 144,000 as many would propagate today. It's a very unique time period because they show up not today but during the tribulation.

But it is also, and I hate to use this word, but it's also a very undefined time. I mentioned a big word at the beginning of the message called parenthetical. There are several chapters in the book of Revelation that do not necessarily just seamlessly go with the chronology. Chapter 7 is one of those, chapter 10 is one of those and chapter 14 is one of those. It's almost as if the Lord takes us out of the timeframe, gives us a background kind of picture, and then picks right back up again. We are not told if the 144,000 are revealed in the second year of the tribulation or the third year of the tribulation. We are really just not told when this comes to fruition.

The only thing we have that gives us any hint of when in this tribulation this 144,000 comes to fruition is it says that one of the tribes is the Levi tribe. In Revelation, chapter 11 it talks about measuring the temple and the sacrifices that are made. And I just have a feeling that in that sacrificial system and all that was taking place at a rampant rate, why would they be set aside in this capacity? But there is that thing we call the abomination

of desolations where the character known as the antichrist comes in and falsely worships in that temple ground. He decimates and desolates, and then later it says the Israelite people run for their lives which could let you say that it is kind of toward the end of that tribulation period. But to be honest with you, it's really undefined. We just don't know at what stage or what part the 144,000 are specifically revealed, but make it very clear that they are revealed during the tribulation in that very unique time period.

That leads to the last question: why? Why the 144,000? What is so significant about this group of people that everybody, it seems like today, wants to be a part of the action? Everybody wants to claim that is their group. We know they're different; we know they're distinct. We know they are a resurrected tribal system; we know that it's a restoration of Romans 11. We know that it happens in the tribulation, so why the 144,000?

The first reason is this: a fulfillment of the promise of God. Back in Genesis 12 God comes to a man by the name of Abram at the time, not Abraham. He is far along in his age; his wife is far along in her age. He calls Abram out of Ur of the Chaldees. According to Hebrews 11, he goes to a land that he knew not of. Basically he goes from the area of what we would call northern Iraq down to the area we would consider Saudi Arabia. In Genesis 15, He looks up in the sky and the Lord says, "How many stars do you see?" Abram says, "I can't number them." The Lord says, "And so shall your descendents be. Do you believe?" Abram says, "I believe." We know the story that even through some bumps and some things that necessarily weren't picture perfect, we get whom we know as Isaac, his descendent who ultimately in Genesis 22 is taken up on Mount Moriah and offered for a sacrifice. The Lord spares him. He then has Jacob, the twelve tribes, and that is the Old Testament in a nutshell.

But in the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, one of the promises that extends throughout the Old Testament is that all nations would know the living true God through their lineage and through who they were. Do you notice what happens in Revelation 7:9? "After this. . ." Now I'm not a

linguistics expert, but “after this” cannot be “before that”. Think about that for a moment. The 144,000 are described. It says, “9After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues.” Understand that promise that was given to Abraham, that all nations would know the living true God through his seed and through his descendents, is coming true. It is because of these 144,000, it is because of these distinct different people going into all of the world that it says all nations, all kindreds, all people and all tongues would know the living true God. So it is the fulfillment of the promise of God.

But I think this is the most important thing and this is what I want to close with: it’s not just the fulfillment of the promise of God, what it shows us is the process of the gospel. By the way, the term gospel means good news. It shows us a very clear process. To be quite honest with you, there are a lot of groups today who claim to be a part of the 144,000. They hand out magazines; they knock on doors. And oftentimes I get into discussions with people who ask why we are not more like that, the zeal and the zealousness. Every group who has ever been or who currently is that claims to be a part of the 144,000 may have their identity wrong, but they have their actions right. Because in this passage of Revelations 7, what we see is the process. The purpose for this group is not to say we’re the special ones; the purpose is not to go aside and hide in a cave and say let’s wait this thing out. They say the time is short, we’ve got to get after it, we will waste no expense, we will waste no time, we will go on our off days and we will make sure that everybody we come across, every person, every tribe, every tongue will hear.

Understand me very clearly: we have studied the book of Revelation for an entire season. We’ve talked about the antichrist; we’ve talked about Jesus Christ; we’ve talked about the millennium and all these concepts. And I want to ask you a somewhat rhetorical question: in all that we’ve studied has it caused you or made you on the inside want to go dig a cave, hide, and think, “Oh no, the sky is falling. This stuff is horrible. I don’t even want to think about these things.” That’s one of the problems in the book of

Revelations – it causes us to get a very inward-focused mentality. We say all these horrible things are going to come up, I've got to buy everything, I've got to have military meals ready to eat for the next twelve years, dig a cave that is bunker-proof and I just want to hide out. I believe based on Revelation 7 and the role of 144,000 that we know we understand the book of Revelation, not when it causes us to fear and dig a cave, but when it inspires us at all cost and all expense to go forth and make sure that nobody is left without hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the purpose of Revelation.

Back in the very first three verses it says the time is at hand; it says the time is short. So as we've studied Revelation and as you continue to study the book of Revelation, if you ever find yourself becoming secluded and a recluse in your mind, I want you to know that you've missed the message because in the midst of Revelation, all of the great tribulation, the antichrist, the abomination of desolations, these 144,000, in the midst of all these things make sure in verse 9: after this all nations, all kindreds, all people and all tongues.

You say, "How does that happen today?" In a very simple term we call it missions. Let me define for you what missions is. If you haven't noticed there are signs at the exit of our campus that say you are now entering the mission field. In just a moment we're going to see a video and have a presentation of all the international and domestic mission endeavors we've had the privilege as a church to support and to be a part of this calendar year. But I want to be clear from the beginning that missions isn't just going overseas; missions is your neighbor who doesn't know Jesus. Missions is your coworker who doesn't know Jesus. Missions is the school down the street that needs to know Jesus. Missions is the restaurant, the building, the worker, whoever it is. Understand that just because we talk about another country, just because we talk about an incredible trip, do not classify that as being all that missions is because according to this the 144,000 did not just go to those across the ocean. It says that they went to all nations, all kindreds, all people, and all tongues. And I am of a belief that when you understand Revelation, you begin to have a passion for missions; you begin to have a passion to give more to

missions and to go more on missions, whether that is a trip overseas or next door to your neighbor with food while they are sick and to share the gospel. This is why we are who we are: changing the world, starting here. Let's pray.