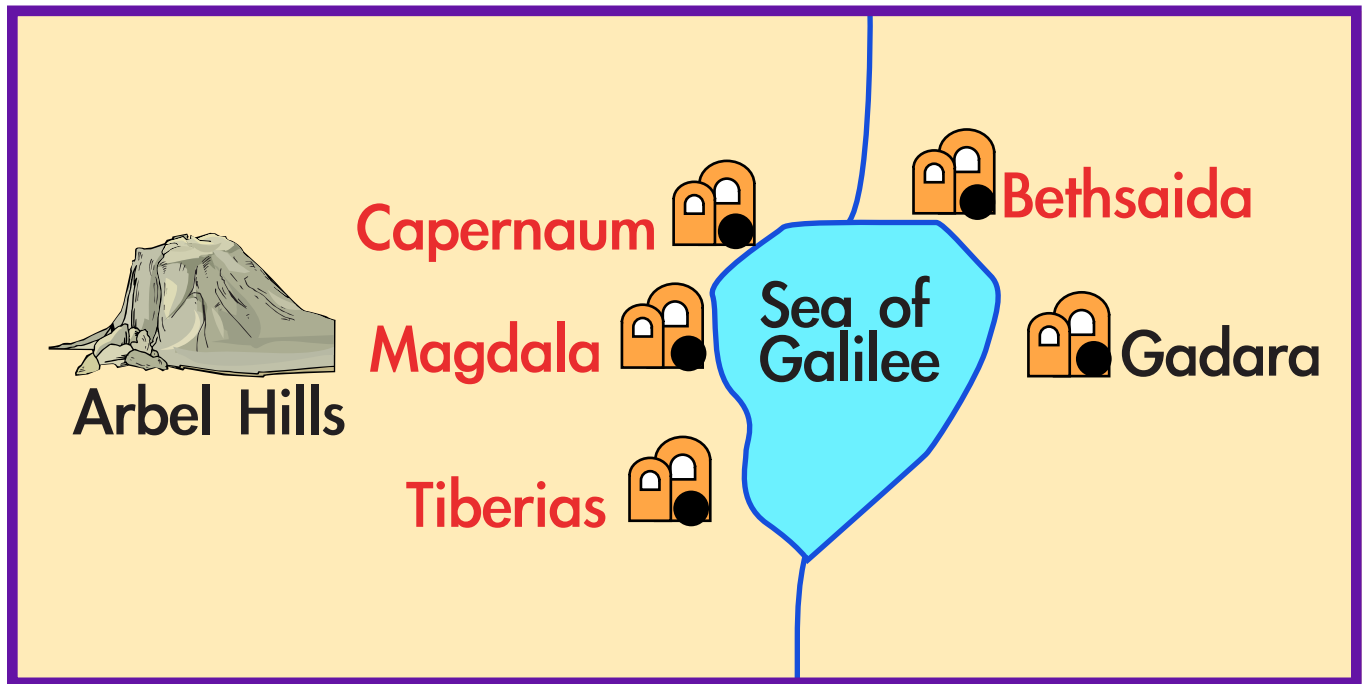


# Tour of the Holy Lands - Bethsaida



The next day we found another hill to climb. This time it was at Bethsaida. Speakers of English say "Beth-say'i-dah." Speakers of Hebrew say, "Bet-sye'dah." Every time you see "beth" in a Hebrew word, you know it means "house of." "Bethsaida" means "House of the Fisher." "Bethlehem" means "House of Bread." "Bethel" means "House of God." On the map, Bethsaida is on the north shore of the lake (the Sea of Galilee).





Our bus driver drove us north around the lake from our hotel in Tiberias. Most of us were leaning over our friends on the right side of the bus in order to snap pictures. Each time we looked at the lake, it was more beautiful. Just think, Jesus and his disciples woke up to the lake almost every single morning. Unexpectedly, our bus pulled over and stopped.





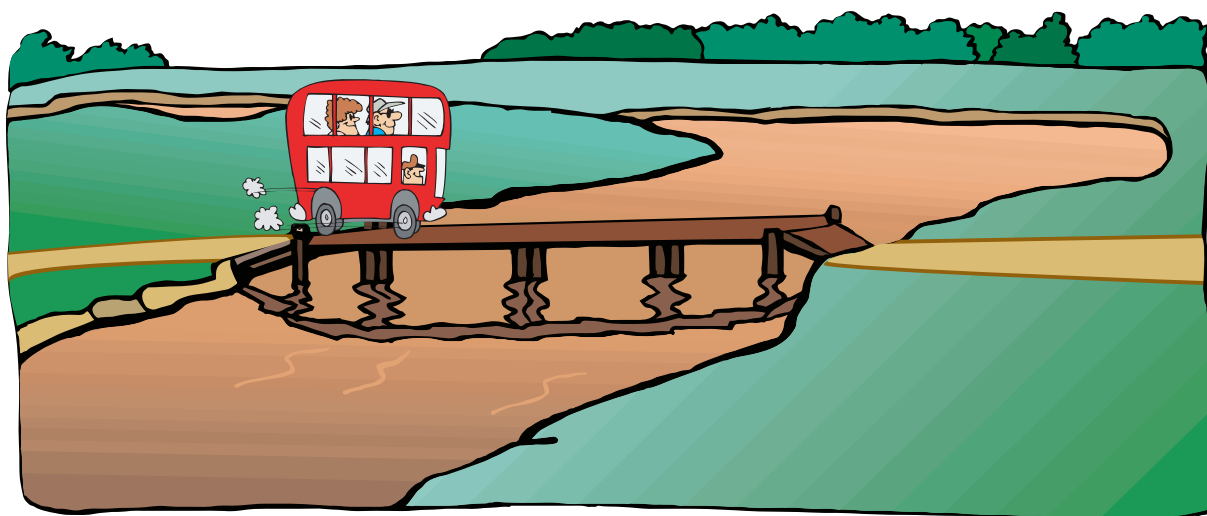
The guide instructed us to move over to the left side of the bus. He wanted us to look at a stone wall. It was no ordinary wall. Looking very closely, we could see small animals hiding between the stones. How clever they were. Their fur was the same color as the stones. The Bible calls them "conies." Some people today call them rock rabbits. Conies are shy and helpless, so they live among rocks to keep safe. They are hard to see when they sit very still. Psalm 104:18 says "The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats; and the rocks for the conies." Not many of our friends have ever seen conies. We took pictures so we could count them when we got home.

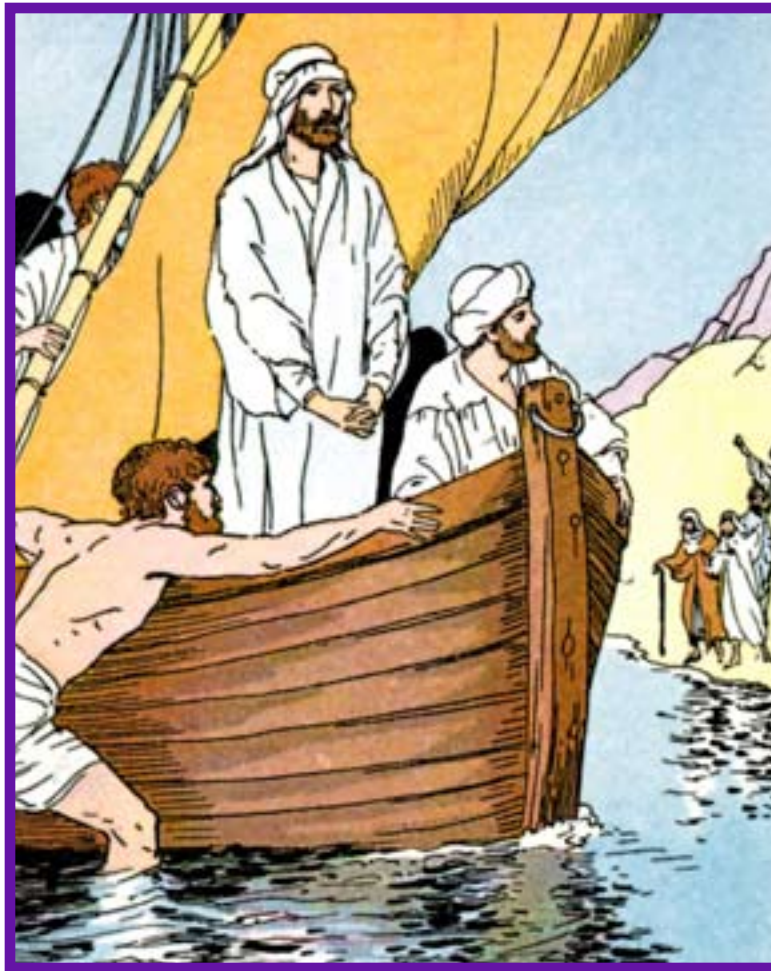






Back on the bus, we continue on our journey. We pass Capernaum and soon cross over a little bridge. The brown water beneath doesn't look very impressive. But when we reached the other side, our guide told us that we had just passed over the Jordan River. We hadn't even been paying attention. We won't do that again. We don't want to miss anything on this tour.





Here we are at Bethsaida, once the home of three of Jesus' disciples - Philip, Andrew and Peter. If we were living in Jesus' day, we would now be in Gentile territory. Jewish territory was back on the other side of the Jordan River. Here on a hillside near Bethsaida is the spot where Jesus fed the 5,000. (Matt 14:15-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14)

It all started when Jesus arrived here, having sailed from Capernaum after a successful preaching-healing mission. He and his disciples needed some quiet time. "Come, rest awhile," he said. But the people back in Capernaum loved his preaching and healing so much that they followed him. They ran along the shore, keeping their eye on the ship he was in. Was he disappointed when he saw the crowds waiting for him when he arrived? No, Jesus had compassion on them. He said they were like sheep without a shepherd.



In Jesus' day the bottom of the Bethsaida hill was right at the shore, but today we have to travel inland to find it. Why? For 2000 years the Jordan River has been carrying silt (fine sand) in its flow. That silt has been settling right at the base of Bethsaida's hillside. Look how fertile the land is today and how far away the hill is from the shore. The crowds following Jesus that day sat right down on the hillside and he began to teach them about the kingdom of heaven. We remember how well voices carry in this basin of Galilee.







We sat down on the hillside. Someone in our group opened the book of John. In John, it was Jesus who noticed that the crowd must be hungry. They had run around the sea, and tracked him up the hillside. Jesus wanted to teach the disciples a new lesson. So he turned to Philip. This was his hometown. Jesus said, "Where can we find bread for this crowd?" Jesus knew what he was going to do, and wanted to find out if Philip knew. Philip was practical. He gazed over the thousands of people, thought about the small bread shops in town, and made a rough guess. He said, "Two hundred coins might feed 2,000, but not this number. Not everyone will get even a taste."





Each Gospel tells the feeding story a little differently. In the books of Matthew, Mark and Luke, it was the disciples who saw the hunger first. The crowds themselves never said they were hungry. The disciples gave Jesus an idea on how the crowd could be fed. First, he should send the crowd away. They said, "The dinner hour is over. The best of the day is gone. We'll stay here with you, while you send the crowds to the villages to buy food. Hurry or they'll never make it before the bread shops close." This seemed like a simple solution. In Luke, they suggest that while they're in the village they could also find a place to stay. They weren't local people and people didn't travel at night in those days. They could trip over rocks in the dark.



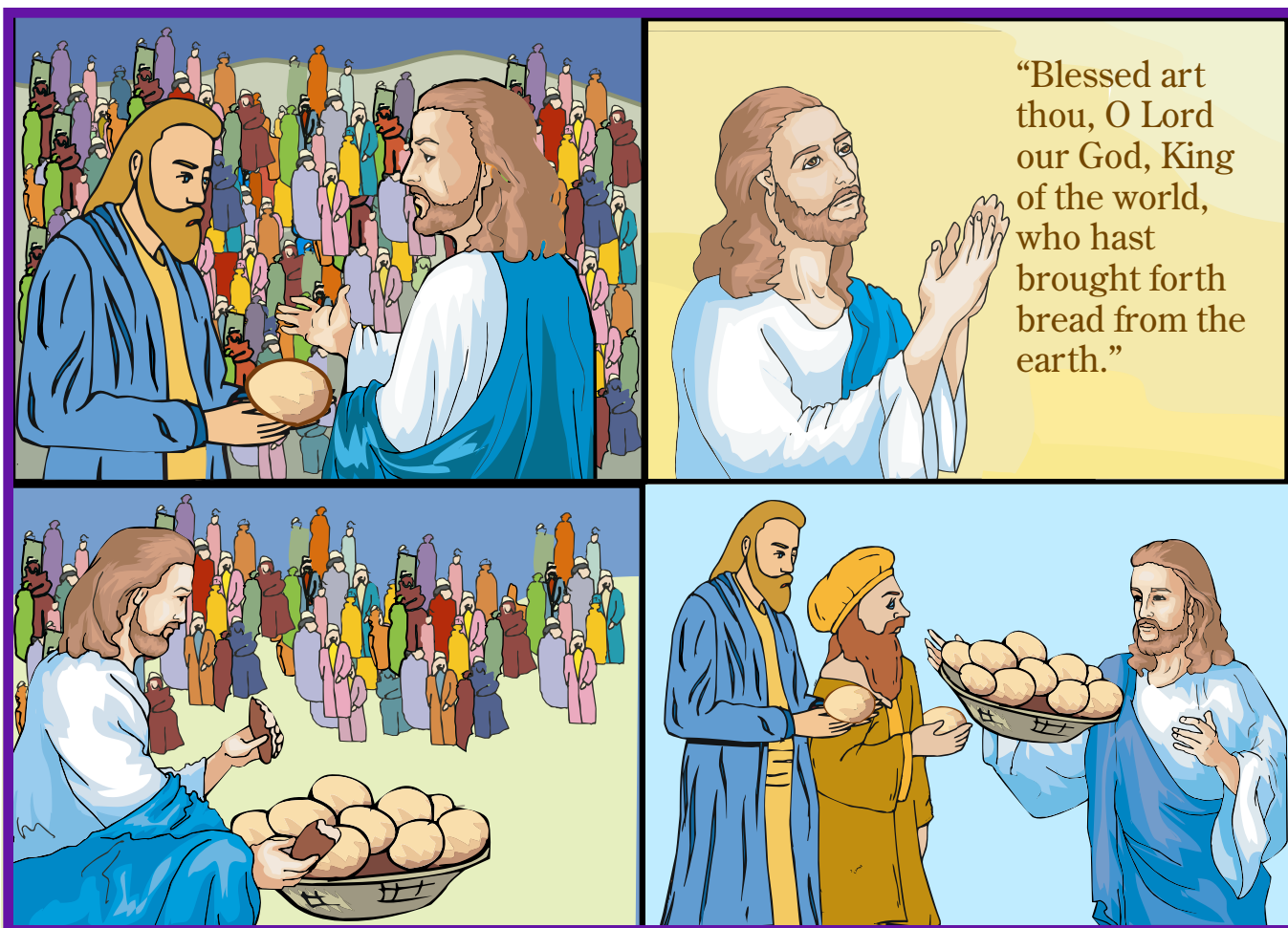


Then the lesson began. Jesus said, "They don't have to leave. *You* feed them." But the disciples complain: "We don't have money for all that bread. We could never carry that many loaves." But Jesus is not going to let them off the hook. In Mark, Jesus asks them: "How many loaves do you have? Look around and see." In John, it's the disciple, Andrew, who supplies five loaves and two fishes from a little boy who is so pleased to offer his little bundle. (Children are such natural heroes. The boy was certainly not ashamed that his lunch was so small.) The disciples were to use what they had. But they still didn't get it.





Jesus finally spoke: "Bring them over here to me." So the spotlight was turned on their teacher. He'd spell it out for them. First he said, "Make the men sit down." Mark says that the grass was green. That meant springtime and wildflowers of yellow mustard and red anemones and bluebonnets. "Make them sit in groups." The disciples could easily pass back and forth with no one left out. Mark said, "They sat in ranks," meaning like a colorful garden bed. We looked like that in our colorful T-shirts. Mark says, "They sat by hundreds, and by fifties." This let the disciples count quickly how many were fed - 5,000 men.

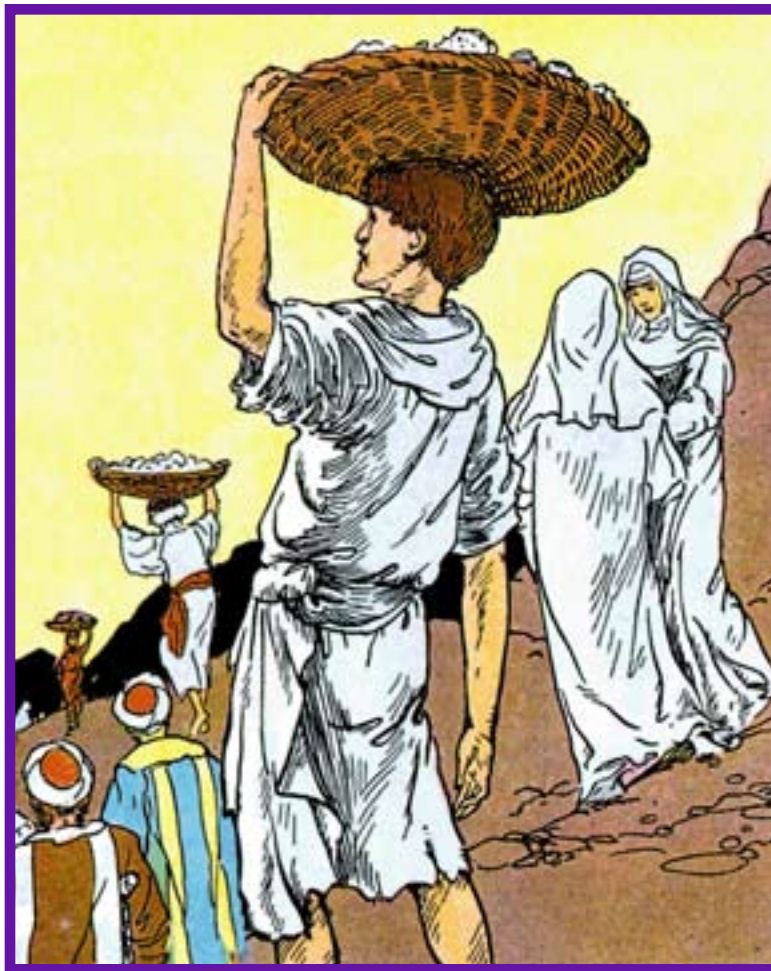


Here were the next five steps:

- (1) He took the bread,
- (2) looked up to heaven, away from the hungry crowd, directing all thoughts to the Giver of all good,
- (3) and said the blessing, which was a prayer of thanks to God. The usual prayer is: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the world, who hast brought forth bread from the earth."
- (4) Jesus broke the loaves apart, not with magic, but as any Jewish father would do for his family.
- (5) But when it came to the giving part, Jesus *kept* giving to the disciples.

We all wished we could have seen Jesus facing that hungry crowd. We wished we could have seen the bread multiplied for the multitude. The people didn't take a little, either, as Philip had said, but as much as they wanted.





The feeding of the 5,000 was not just a picnic with people sharing food. They called it the "Miracle of the Loaves." It reminded them of the manna in the desert. Because of it, Jesus was called a prophet. People wanted to take him by force and make him king. And feeding wasn't the end of the story. There were leftovers! Jesus supplied more than the eaters wanted. Twelve baskets. No food was wasted. Yet he kept back nothing for himself. And Matthew tells us more. Not only were 5,000 men fed, but also women and children - folks who weren't usually important enough to count in those days. But Matthew counted them. The crowd might have been as large as 10,000. Just imagine, 10,000 people on the hillside of Bethsaida and only 2-3,000 population on the top of the hill.

We're ready to climb! Let's go!



Look up there! What in the world is happening? There's a whole lot of shaking going on! Getting closer, we see two women shaking dirt through large sifters. We want to know all about it. They say they're on an archaeological dig. We have a list of questions. We ask them to show us around.







First they introduce us to their boss, the archaeologist, who is surveying the site. To us, the site looks like a bunch of rocks, but to his eye, it's divided into buildings and roads. He knows just where to dig to uncover the lost city of Bethsaida.

They tell us that every morning before dawn they leave the kibbutz where they are staying and drive to the site. (A "kibbutz" is a large farm owned by a group of people.) The first stop is this tool box. They put on gloves, and maybe a helmet. They pick up a kneepad to kneel on, and the tools needed for that day, maybe a trowel, a pail, a brush, a shovel, or a pick axe. Then they follow the archaeologist to the work spot for the day. These women and others have come from the United States for a two-week adventure. They don't need any special skills, just the desire to work and learn more about Israel and the Bible.







Here the team is being instructed on how to uncover a wall. They can see that the top of the wall is way below the surface. It's made out of large stones neatly fitted together. The workers will get on their knees and begin uncovering the wall by filling their buckets with the earth and anything that might be in the earth.

We watched the team at work. Their filled buckets were delivered to the sifters. Shaking the sifters will reveal shards, animal bones and pieces of burned brick. We remember what a shard is - a piece of pottery. They might even find something extra special, like a coin or an earring or a bronze artifact. The next step for the shards was a good scrub under a faucet. The dirt had been stuck there for hundreds of years.



In the afternoon, the whole dig team went to the Kibbutz museum. We were invited to go along. There they noted each shard in the computer under "handles, rims and such." For fun, they called that process, "pottery reading." Then they put the shards in old vegetable boxes from the farm, marked with that day's date and the place where they were found.

Then came the best part. They placed a puzzle in front of us. They said we could try to put this piece of pottery together. None of us had ever worked on a 3-dimensional jigsaw puzzle before, especially one with no picture on the box. We had to find two pieces that fit together, glue them with white glue and hold them together with masking tape. We actually found two. Wow! Then we stuck the edge of the glued piece in a small sand box to dry. Later someone else would add a third piece to the puzzle.





We really appreciated the finished pottery pieces on display at the museum. In fact, we'll see ancient pottery in a whole new light from now on.

We asked the diggers what they'll miss most when their two weeks are over. They said it will be the peaceful mornings on the dig, walking through the red, yellow, and blue wild flowers, hearing the sounds of cows, donkeys, and birds echoing in the silent hills, and especially seeing the shining sea always in the distance.

