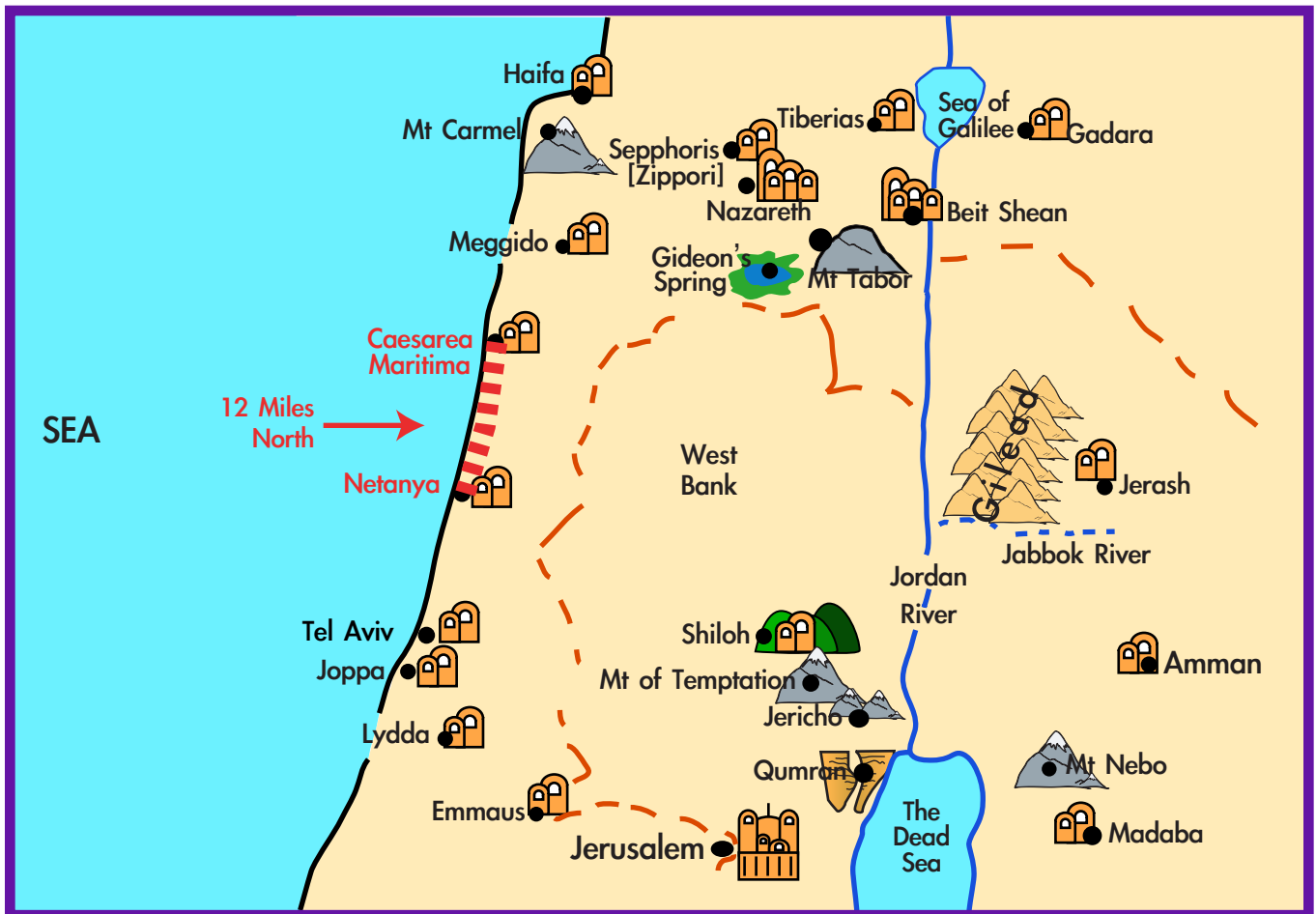


Tour of the Holy Lands - Caesarea (Part 1)

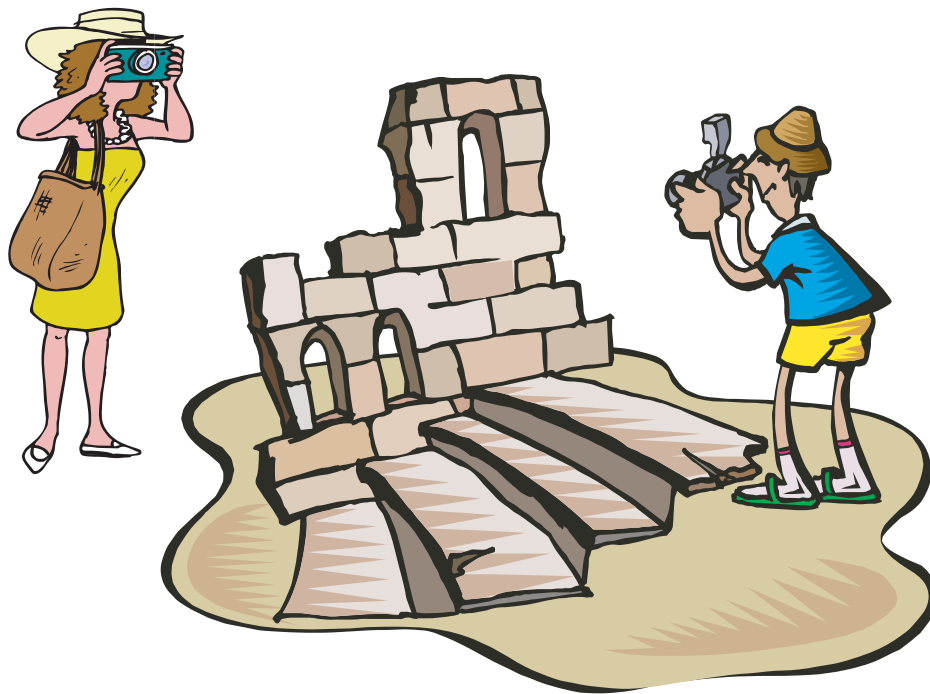


It didn't take long to drive the 12 miles to Caesarea by the Sea, the Roman city where Cornelius and his family lived. It's the first Roman city we have ever seen. This land used to belong to the Roman Empire, which stretched all around the Mediterranean Sea.



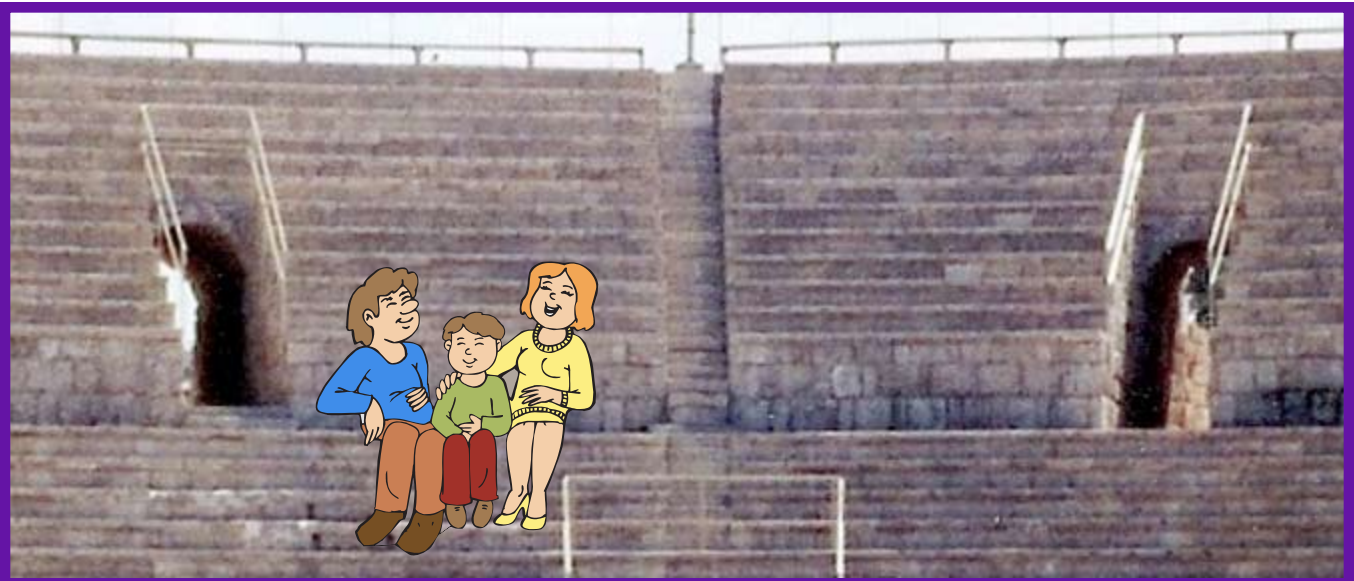


After we entered the city, we saw a stone wall in the distance. We got closer and entered an ancient, arched doorway. They didn't tell us where we were going.





It was a surprise! We walked down a short hallway and out into the bright sunlight, and found ourselves standing in a huge Roman outdoor theater. Wow!



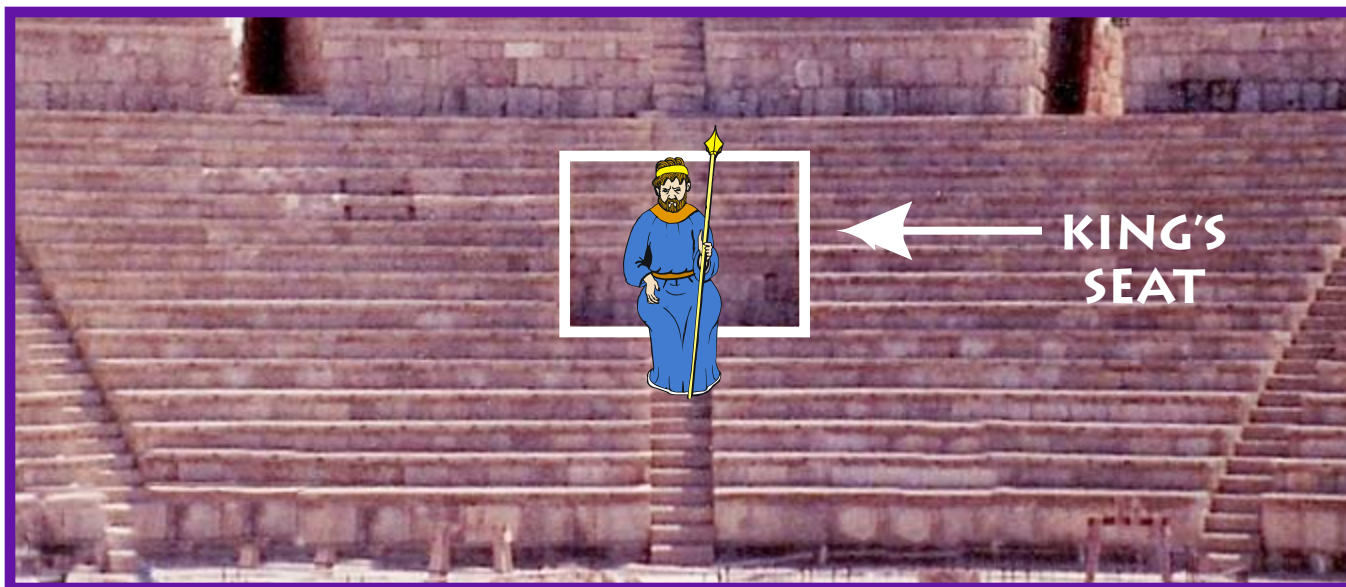
Our guide tells us the name of this particular hallway in Latin, the language of Ancient Rome, is "vomitorium" because of the crowds of people that used to squeeze through the small passage. Of course, we all think that is very funny. We sat down on the seats - what a beautiful view from way up high!



When Peter came to Caesarea, he would not have found many Jews here. Jews would have felt unclean in a Roman city because it had a theater, which showed plays that were also unclean.

Peter would see statues of gods lining the streets. That must have made him uncomfortable because he knew that believing in other gods breaks the First and Second Commandments.





In the middle of the theater, there was a special seat just for the king, whose name was Herod Agrippa I in Peter's day. Many in this king's family were called "Herod" after the first Herod, Herod the Great. The Herod family had done many evil things. This Herod had killed one of Jesus' disciples whose name was James. He was about to kill Peter too, but Peter escaped from prison in Jerusalem in the middle of the night. Herod was very angry. He arrested the soldiers who were supposed to guard Peter and sentenced them to death. When Herod couldn't find Peter, he was frustrated. Peter had left Jerusalem and come here to Caesarea. The story of Peter's escape is fun to read because it includes several surprises. It's found in Acts 12:1-14.

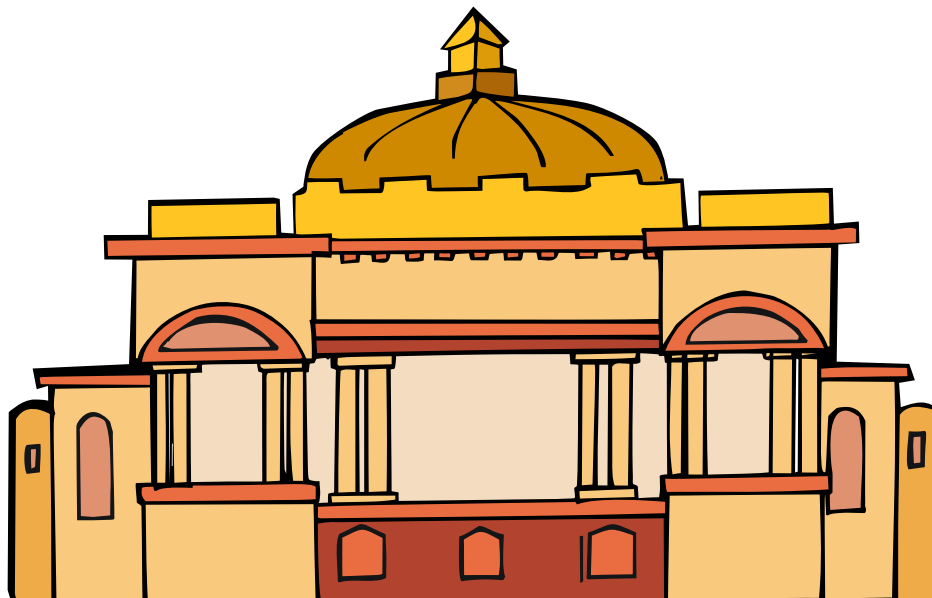




The last story about Herod happened right here in this theater in the year 44 - that means 44 years after the birth of Jesus. We weren't familiar with the story, but it's mentioned in Acts 12:21-23. Since the Bible doesn't tell the whole story, our guide filled in the blanks from another book by a famous writer named Josephus. There was a festival in the city at the time, with athletes performing and visitors from other cities. Herod Agrippa appeared at his special seat wearing magnificent robes woven from silver threads. His robes reflected the sunlight so much that people had to shade their eyes. After his speech, the audience shouted, "It is the voice of a god and not of a man!" Herod used to lie to people, claiming that he was a Jew, but he certainly didn't act like one because a Jew would never agree to being called a god. Just then the king was struck with a terrible pain and carried out of the theater to his palace where he died.



After climbing around the theater, we then headed down towards the sea, eager to visit Herod's palace.



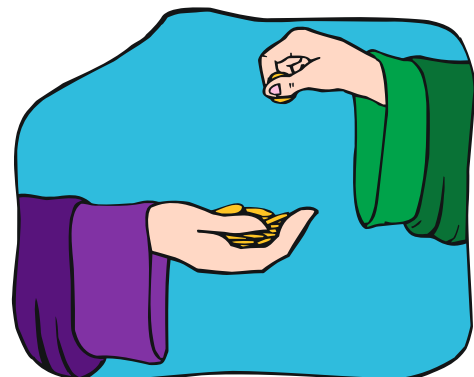


On the way to Herod's Palace at Caesarea by the Sea, we remembered that Saul started out putting Christians in prison and ended up being one of the greatest Christians of all time. There was such a change in his character from being proud to being humble, that he changed his name from Saul to Paul. "Saul" was a tall handsome warrior king in the Bible, but the name "Paul" means "little." This remarkable man changed from depending on his own strength to depending on the power of God.





By the time Paul came to Caesarea, he had already made three journeys around the countries of Asia Minor and Greece. These were not vacation trips. He was spreading the teachings of Jesus. And the believers that he converted set up Christian churches in their towns. Now he was on his way to Jerusalem to talk to the Apostles and share the news of his successful trip. He was also carrying a special surprise package for them. Along the way, he had been collecting money to help the Apostles at headquarters. The word "Apostle" means "to be sent out" and refers to someone who had been with Jesus and had seen him after he had risen from the dead.





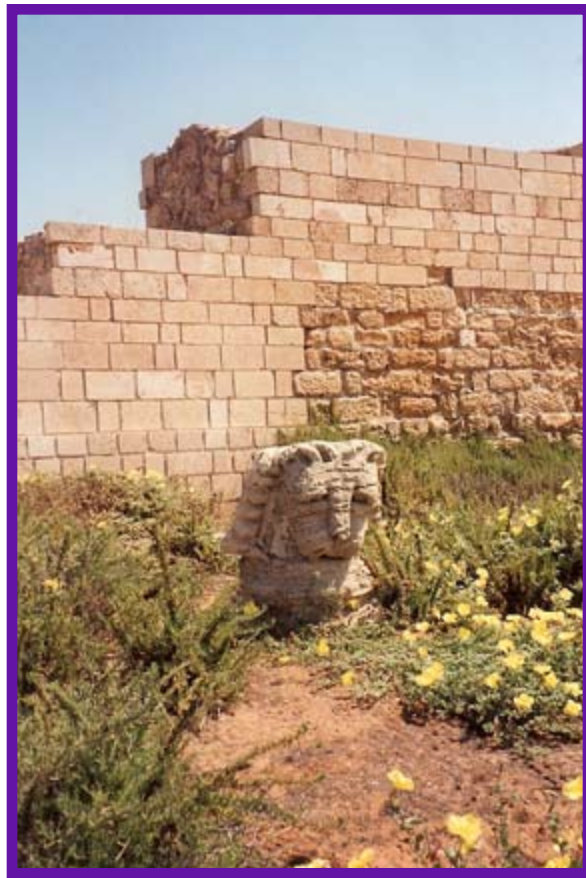
We look out at the sea and picture the boat that must have brought Paul to this city. Herod had ordered men to dig a deep harbor so big sailing ships could get close to land. There were no passenger ships at that time, so Paul must have been on a ship carrying grain.





When Paul arrived, he found a famous Christian living here whose name was Philip. Philip invited him to rest up at his house, and so he did. The story is found in Acts 21:8-10. The two men must have shared wonderful stories. Philip, after helping to care for widows in Jerusalem, had done great healing work in Samaria. We wondered if they talked about why Philip had gone to Samaria in the first place. It was Paul, then called Saul, who chased him out of Jerusalem, arresting as many Christians as he could find. Of course, that was in the past. All was forgiven, and the two men had better things to talk about!

Philip had four unmarried daughters, who must have served the men some good meals. These women devoted themselves to Christ Jesus and even helped to write five books explaining what it was like in those days of the early church. Many people would like to read those books, but not even the experts can find them anymore.

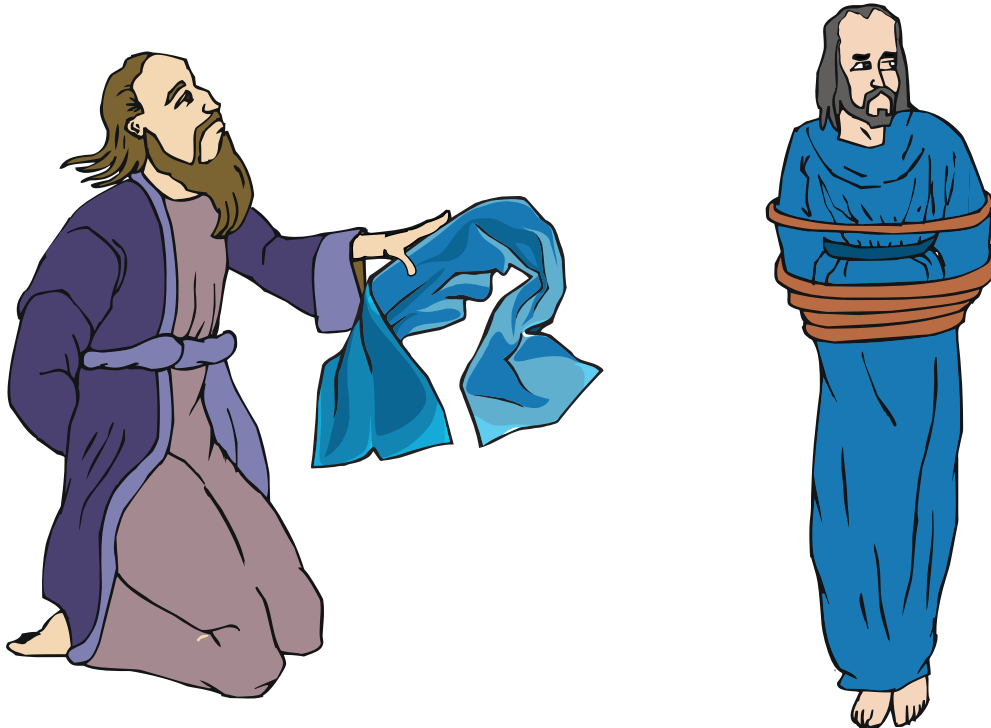


Another Christian was invited over to the house to meet Paul that day. His name was Agabus and his story can be found in Acts 21:10-15. His talent was listening for God's voice. The things he shared with the Christians often came true. He once predicted a famine, which meant there would be no food due to lack of rain for a long time. Logically, if there's no rain, there's no grain – no bread, no vegetables, no fruit, no meat. Several famines did come upon the land.





Agabus had a new warning for Paul. He told it in a most clever way so no one would forget it. Agabus asked Paul for his cloth belt. Then he wrapped his own feet and hands with it, and said loudly, "The owner of this belt shall be tied up by the Jews in Jerusalem and turned over to those who don't believe in gods."





When everyone in the house heard that, they begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. But Paul said, "Why all this weeping? You're making it harder for me." He said, "I'm ready, not only to be arrested, but to die in Jerusalem." We may well wonder to ourselves: could we ever say that? Would we ever be so loyal to our religion that we would die for it? Many did in those days. This was something more important than their lives. Jesus, too, was ready to go to Jerusalem, knowing he would be arrested and later die.

