



EXPERIENCING



the **LAND**



of the **BOOK**

*A Life-Changing
Journey through
Israel*



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The Theater at Caesarea

Caesarea:

The City Built on Sand

After a long flight—with little sleep but several movies—our planeload of pilgrims finally lands in Israel. Some tour groups head immediately to Jerusalem, but our plan is to drive north along the coast toward Galilee, saving Jerusalem until the end of the trip. After a short night's rest, our first stop is Caesarea, the seaside city built by Herod the Great.

THE EXCITEMENT OF THE FIRST STOP

As the bus stops at the entrance, excited tourists grab their hats and cell-phones, adjust the headsets to their listening devices, and walk into the site. The guide tries to lead everyone toward the theater, but the tourists seem to scatter in all directions, snapping soon-to-be-forgotten pictures of every nondescript rock and broken statue. The wayward lambs finally enter the seaside theater and gaze in awe at their first authentic “ancient ruin” rising up from the surrounding sands.

Though restored by archaeologists—and used today for musical performances—the theater retains the well-worn look of a structure that has faced the Mediterranean Sea for twenty centuries. The scarred and pocked sandstone hints at the storms that have lashed it through the years. For the jet-lagged tourists their initial drowsiness gives way to a sense of excitement. But this emotional reaction is *not* from the height, or grandeur, or intricate workmanship of this theater. Rather, it comes from being face-to-face with the first

visible, tangible link to the past. This is the group's first gateway back to the time of the Bible.

The tourists suddenly realize that Herod the Great might have walked across the same stones they are now treading, his hands could have brushed against the very walls they are touching. The remains of Herod's palace—the very palace where the apostle Paul was imprisoned for two years—stands a scant few hundred yards away. Before the group leaves Caesarea they will also visit the hippodrome, where chariot races were held, the ancient harbor—built by Herod and later rebuilt by the Crusaders—and the Roman aqueduct that brought water from Mount Carmel, six miles away.

One of the guide's many responsibilities on the tour is to keep the group moving. They want to slow down, breathe in the history, and populate the ruins with people from the Bible—Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa I, Peter, Cornelius, Philip the evangelist, Paul, Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa II. But the guide knows all the other sites the group must cover during this day. Like the White Rabbit in Walt Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*, they are all but shouting, "We're late, we're late! For a very important date! No time to say 'hello, good-bye,' we're late, we're late, we're late!"



The hippodrome next to Herod's palace

For most visitors to Caesarea, walking through the ruins is emotionally impactful, the first of many such experiences during the trip. But those who are able to look beyond the impressive ruins—and who aren't distracted by the guide's impatience—will sometimes spot the fatal flaw in Herod the Great's grand design for Caesarea. The city's foundations didn't rest on solid rock like

that in the hills off to the east. Instead, the city spread out along the shifting sands of the Mediterranean coast. Herod's original harbor is gone . . . sunk beneath the sea. The aqueduct that brought Caesarea its life-giving water now stands in majestic isolation from the rest of the city. The aqueduct's northern edge disappeared beneath the sand that has relentlessly reclaimed its territory, and its southern end has been torn away by the Mediterranean—leaving a gap between the aqueduct and the city it was built to serve. Vast parts of the ancient city itself still remain covered by sand.



Remains of the Roman aqueduct

What Herod thought was permanent was only temporary. The city—named after Caesar, built with Roman technology, and intended as a monument to Herod's greatness—couldn't endure. The buildings may have been grand, but their foundations were supported by nothing more than shifting sand.

Leaving the theater, the group passes through a small forest of pillars and

sarcophagi on its way to Herod's palace. The palace itself juts out into the Mediterranean, along with a freshwater pool extending out into the sea—perhaps the world's first infinity pool. On the north side of the palace, the group walks in the foundations of the assembly hall built by Herod the Great to receive important visitors. This is almost certainly the room where the apostle Paul stood before Festus and Agrippa. In Acts 25, Luke reported that Agrippa and his wife entered the auditorium “with great pomp, accompanied by military officers and prominent men of the city” (v. 23). Imagine the scene. Rome's provincial governor entertaining royalty, the grandson of King Herod, along with all the prominent citizens of Caesarea.

And then Paul was led into the assembly hall, the iron chains on his wrists and ankles clanking and scraping across the mosaic floor. To those gathered in the room, Paul must have seemed little more than a common prisoner brought in to satisfy the curiosity of this visiting dignitary.

But when Paul was invited to speak, the scene changed. Paul shared his personal testimony, including his encounter with the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth. But Paul wasn't done. Speaking directly to these leaders who thought they held his life in their hands, Paul presented the claims of Jesus and called on them to respond to *Him*. Jesus was to “suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and in this way announce God's light to Jews and Gentiles alike”



The site of Herod's palace and assembly hall

(Acts 26:23). Agrippa the Jew and Festus the Gentile understood that Paul was speaking directly to them!

Festus cried out, “Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!” (Acts 26:24). But Paul wouldn’t back down. “I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. What I am saying is the sober truth” (v. 25). And then pointing to King Agrippa he said, “King Agrippa knows about these things. I speak boldly, for I am sure these events are all familiar to him, for they were not done in a corner! King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do” (vv. 26–27).

Agrippa interrupted Paul and responded, somewhat defensively, “Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?” But Paul refused to be silenced. “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains” (vv. 28–29).

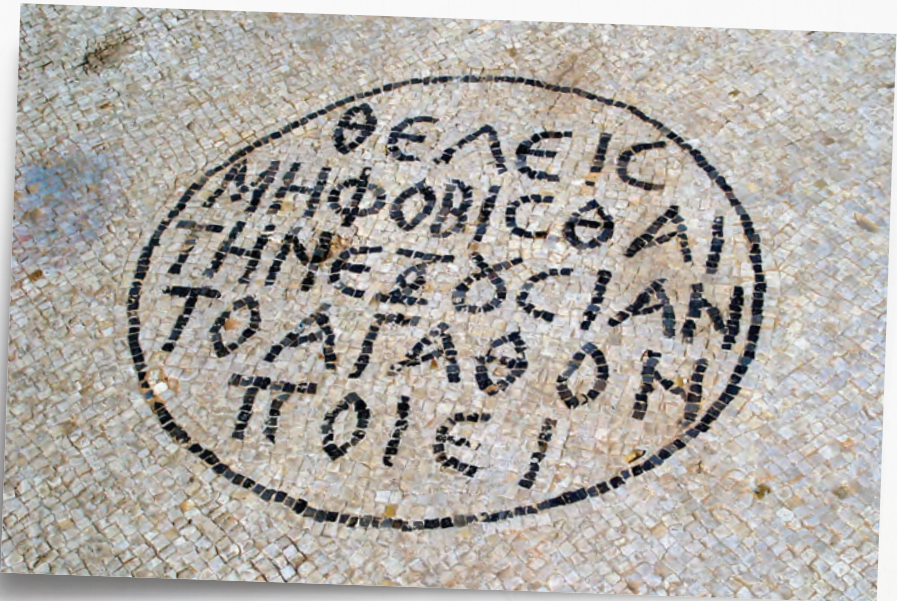
The apostle Paul passed through Caesarea, his two-year imprisonment likely little more than a footnote in the ledgers of the Roman rulers who governed Judea from here. But the mission to which Paul had committed his life was not built on shifting sand. It was anchored on the solid rock of Jesus. Paul himself reminded the church at Corinth of this truth. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have—Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11).

Paul’s words raise an important question for any group about to begin its journey through the Holy Land. In what should we place our trust? It’s the same question that some who listened to Paul’s message two thousand years ago must have asked themselves. They could see the visible might of Rome. Could such might and power somehow be less significant than the promise of salvation offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? To many in Paul’s day, such a choice must have seemed absurd. The Roman ruler of Caesarea, after hearing Paul’s impassioned message, cried out, “Paul, you are insane” (Acts 26:24). He could see the impressive buildings already standing, hear the clank of hammers hitting chisels to fashion still more monuments to Rome’s greatness. To Festus, *this* was reality. How could Paul believe that the power of God through Jesus Christ was greater than this?

Two millennia have passed since these men met in this very audience hall in Caesarea. Only fragments of the palace remain. The city built to honor the name of Caesar—and promote the greatness of Herod—is nothing more than an archaeological curiosity. Worn, weathered, world-weary. But the message announced by the apostle Paul has spread with power around the globe. That’s an important lesson to carry from this first stop on this journey through the land!

FUN WITH SEMINARY STUDENTS

I love beginning a tour at Caesarea. Unfortunately, the extensive archaeology and amazing work of preservation have taken away the ability to pull a practical joke on guests. Before much of the restoration had been completed, parts of the excavation were reburied beneath the sand to prevent damage or looting. On some of my early trips with seminary students we would take them on a walk between Herod’s palace and the harbor area. At one key spot we would stop and say, “Imagine what else might be buried here in the sand, right under our feet!” And then we would begin scraping the sand away with our feet.



Mosaic with quotation of Romans 13:3

As Greek letters started coming into view, the students would get excited and drop to their knees to help brush away more sand. Soon the group had uncovered an entire inscription. And then the budding Greek scholars would translate, with a little help from the professors, “Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you.” Why, that’s a direct quotation of Romans 13:3!

And indeed it was. This Byzantine-era inscription, one of two actually, was discovered on the floor of a large public building. The inscription is now completely uncovered, but the “joy of discovery”—and the practical joke—are forever gone!

Take some time to explore on your own. Make sure to get all your pictures. And don’t forget to use the restrooms on your way back to the bus. But don’t dawdle! The bus will be leaving in fifteen minutes. “We’re late, we’re late, we’re late!”