

46 Keys to Dynamic Bible Study
The Third Day Phenomenon: Jonah's Story
Read Jonah 1 and 2

It was not the bellowing of the ship's captain standing over Jonah's still body which awakened him from the depths of a profound slumber--it was the captain's words. In the flicker of candlelight, the captain appeared ghost-like echoing the very words Jonah's God Yahweh had said to him days before: "Arise and cry out" The breath of the chilly sea-salt air and a shake of his head carried Jonah past his initial grogginess as the captain repeated his words, "Arise, cry out to your god." The yells and screams of sailors above and the torturous rising and falling of the ship explained the panic in the captain's appeal. "Well," Jonah thought, "at least I'm not being commanded again to 'Arise and cry out against Nineveh.'"

"Arise" had been Yahweh's initial command; however, Jonah, had merely arisen to go down. He went down to Joppa in order to board a ship headed for Tarshish, a location in the opposite direction of Nineveh. He went down into the ship, fleeing the presence of Yahweh. Then he went down to the inner cavern of the ship to go down to sleep. And that was where the captain located him.

When Jonah stepped on deck into the violent storm, he saw shredded cloths hanging from masts that had previously been pregnant with breezes that had carried the ship through calm seas. He heard raucous blasts of thunder, lightning, and pelting rain. He felt the terror of seafaring men, used to tempests at sea but now faced with something outside their experience. Though Jonah's conscience demanded that he admit he was at fault, he remained wordless until the sailors (casting lots in order to discover the offender of their gods) peered at Jonah with accusatory eyes—the lot had fallen to him.

Above a din of waves booming against skeletal remains of the deck, Jonah rattled out his credentials: a Hebrew who believed in the only true God of heaven--the One who ruled the sea that they feared and the dry land they longed for. The sailors, thoroughly drenched and near weeping with fatigue, immediately recognized that Jonah's God was superior to all gods. They concluded, therefore, that Jonah must be kept back from harm. The fear of Jonah's God far surpassed their aching muscles that burned like an inferno, so they feverishly rowed toward dry land. They ignored Jonah's confession that he was fleeing his God and disregarded his plea to be thrown overboard.

The increasing viciousness of the waves and the exhaustion of the sailors finally prevailed. Oars eventually dropped out of hands swollen and bruised. The arms they were attached to were hanging lifelessly, as though they did not belong to bodies formerly rugged and brawny. In misery they cried out, "Yahweh, don't let us perish!" Struggling on the slick boards of the deck, the sailors lifted Jonah to the rails. Regretfully, they dropped him into the chaotic waters below. Instantly, the sea stopped raging.

Again, Jonah went down as he had at the first. As water engulfed him, he felt the searing pain of pressure building against a chest filled with the only air he could gasp in before hitting the water. Jonah prayed and made vows to Yahweh, his God--that's when the great fish arrived to rescue Jonah. He was vomited up onto the dry land (after three days and three nights) to be confronted by Yahweh a second time. "Arise," Yahweh said once more, "and cry out...."

Jonah's third-day deliverance, Jesus informed the religious leaders in Matthew 12:38-41, was the only sign He would permit Israel, for "as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Thus, the Jonah story becomes an illustration of the "third day phenomenon" alluded to by Paul, who said that the Messiah would rise on the third day "according to the Scriptures." Paul is referring to the Old Testament narratives which demonstrate that God delivers His people on the third day. In the story above, Jonah is spit out onto dry land on the third day.

There is an additional allusion to the third day. Jonah had announced to the sailors that Yahweh is the God of the heavens who "rules the seas and the dry land." The irony is that the seas and dry land were created on...the third day.