



Chapter III

God said to Jonah again, "Go to Nineveh and caution the people that unless they repent and stop piling up sins, their city shall perish in forty days from the moment you enter it."

Jonah did not disobey this time, and hit the road straight to Nineveh.

As I said earlier, according to Book of Jonah, Nineveh was an exceeding city of three days' journey.

It is well to parenthesize here that I do not know any city in the world which takes a walker no less than three days to cross through, except for the old-time Berlin, which had the deadly barrier extending across the city. Modern archeology has determined that the size of Nineveh in Jonah's days was about 12.9 kilometers in circumference, from which the average diameter of the city becomes 4.1 kilometers, and this is not very much longer than my Sunday morning walk. So it is my speculation that the author of the Old Testament meant that if a traveler wanted to cross the city Nineveh, he should normally be prepared for at least three days' journey on account of barriers, rather than the actual span of the city. And if my speculation is correct, Nineveh's number one barrier must have been its citizens themselves because God said their evil eyes were glaring at him.

Once upon a time in old-time Kyoto, when it was the capital of Japan, a warrior monk posted himself on a bridge and did not allow people to pass unless they gave up a sword voluntarily or otherwise, and it is told that eventually he collected 999 swords. Likewise, probably, the citizens of Nineveh would bar the travelling strangers at many convenient points such as bridge, narrow passage, tunnel or privately made gate and extorted unlawful private tolls in money or kind. They probably kept watch dogs at such barriers to make it

harder for travelers to pass free. Thus equipped, the Ninevites might raise the tolls higher, or even rob the travelers, if the latter had, for example, a fine mule with treasure boxes hung on it, or anyway if they were not well equipped with weapons. The citizens would even demand sex if the travelers could not pay the lifted tolls. They might kidnap children from them for ransom. Now, this is a rough speculation of the present author but if the situation was not as bad as this or worse, God would not ever think of annihilating the total inhabitants of any city.

So it is assumed that such was the city of Nineveh at best when Jonah arrived at one of its gates, where very likely he was squeezed to pay a large sum for admittance, becoming almost penniless. It is also likely that any incoming foreigner without some sort of authorization letter was suspected as a spy, and Jonah could have been under surveillance by secret police.

If it took three days to go from one end of the city to the other anyhow, to preach throughout the city was an extraordinary task, and it may well take no less than forty days to complete it. Jonah started prophesying with courage and determination. He had learned by heart the following words in Assyrian language and chanted them all day long:

"Good citizens of Nineveh,

Hear the words of Jehovah:

Repent and drop wrongdoings.

Fear God and stop evildoings.

For if you ever continue your sinful ways,

He shall exterminate the city in forty days!"

Of course the number forty was decreased by one each day; so he had also learned how to count down to one in Assyrian. Jonah picked up forty pebbles and put them in his bag, and threw away a pebble a day so as not to make miscounting. Thus started the countdown for the destruction or survival of Nineveh.

Jonah was traumatically afraid of Ninevites due to his childhood experience. He kept encouraging himself by saying to himself that he is closely watched by God and would be protected by him so long as he did his will. So, rain or shine he kept prophesying boldly.

However, nobody took him seriously. When Jonah came closer, one would shout: "You stink! Go away!" Some would spit on him and some others even threw things at him. Of course no one invited him to his house so that Jonah always spent night outdoors. Nevertheless, Jonah kept his preaching work unflinchingly as ordered by God. Fortunately his fishy smell confused watch dogs at various barriers to mistake him for a dog's meat man, so he could relatively freely pass the barriers.

He prophesied wherever and whenever he found a person, adult or child. He entered every street he could find and prophesied at every household on the street. The city had many public squares and he visited all and revisited many for the propagation of the God's words. The city was surrounded by huge brick walls with many gates, and he encircled the city walking along the inside of the walls, all the way chanting the prophecy. Nor did he omit the famous old hanging garden, which was an architecture resembling pyramid tiered with five terraces, each carrying artfully planted orchards of various leafy trees. Jonah chanted as he went about through the garden, wakening many who were taking siesta in the shades. He rested by an aqueduct and filled his water bag with the water running in it. Following the water, he went down to a riverside where people were bathing and/or washing clothes, and prophesied to them; and he bathed himself and washed his clothes. Suddenly loud sound of cymbals and drums echoed all round the city and people began hurrying to public squares and temples for the afternoon prayers. Jonah stayed by the riverside, but temple policemen came and whipped him to a temple. He chanted his song in the temple, and alarmed the priests and laymen by overturning the tables of corruption.

Thus he chanted God's words wherever he went. He visited a hamlet inhabited by people with skin diseases, where he prophesied and left a pebble. He spent a rainy night in straws in a stable, and in the morning

chanted to the slaves working on the farm as well as their owners. He came across an area where were houses of prostitutes, and he chanted the news to them as well as their customers, male and female. Then, he came to a graveyard, where he met an outcast suffering from a mental disease, and they prophesied to each other. A gravedigger came and took the man to let him help digging for a burial. **Joining the funeral ceremony, Jonah chanted the prophecy.** He arrived at a marketplace where many street performers were active, and he sang his warning song. Then he prophesied at the gate of the royal palace and kept doing so even as he was arrested and brought to the dungeon, where he continued his chanting for the inmates and guards. Officials said to the king that the Hebrew monk ought to be put to death on account of his disquieting prophecy as well as his grave misdeeds in the temples and shrines. He was dropped into a muddy cistern to die, but was rescued by a king's eunuch; he had to waste two pebbles in the cistern. He became weak but did not stop prophesying. He would preach whenever he found a listener, and when none, he would even preach to animals, birds, insects and fish.

Thirty-four pebbles returned to the earth, and yet no one had repented. People kept being unafraid of God and repeated fraudulence, theft and violence. However, it happened on the yet-five-pebble day that the lumber merchant who had boarded the same ship with Jonah that nearly wrecked came to Nineveh as he had been invited by the king to negotiate a sale of Lebanon cedar. On that day he went to the palace to report his arrival, and on his way to an inn assigned for royal guests, he encountered a flow of a mob and joining it he entered a shrine where a ritual of child sacrifice was about to be performed.

Then, he recalled vividly the ocean storm and how the runaway prophet Jonah was swallowed by the whale after neglecting his mission of denouncing the wickedness of Ninevites, and he remembered that the prophet had said his god was going to eradicate Nineveh. Then he heard a keen piteous crying of a boy, and saw the bloody ritual perpetrated by masked priests, and the mob roared crazily. The smell of the wholly burnt body sickened the merchant, and when he saw some eating the cuts from the body he was terrified lest the God should annihilate the city any moment. Then, his eyes caught a man standing on a wall of the shrine, which was across the plaza from him; the man was incessantly beating his breast hard with his fists, shouting something in tears. The merchant soon recognized him as none other than Jonah the prophet, who he had thought had long been expired in the great fish. He was astounded and thought with great fear, "Surely God is going to annihilate this city, for he lifted Jonah's ghost from Sheol to let it at last prophesy the judgment! Alas, alas! Am I cursed, for twice have I fallen into the same powerful palm of the same God!" He called the prophet's name but the roar of the mob was too loud. He tried to reach him, but the mob started to depart preventing him from approaching the wall, from which the prophet disappeared.

The merchant inquired some who had stayed in the shrine plaza about the poorly dressed man who had been shouting on the wall, pretending he did not know him. They said to the well-attired foreign merchant that the man was one of those many self-professed prophets who chant hymns at the doors of houses to earn food and drink, that he had been in the city about a month already, and that he was especially known for his fishy smell and never worshipping an idol, unlike others.

Then, the merchant confessed that he was an acquaintance of his, and told them the truth about Jonah – everything he remembered about him including his being a true prophet of the Hebrew god, and his eventually being eaten by a whale, which, he added, was white. This last remark not only made it even harder for the listeners to believe what already had sounded like a perfect tall tale, but also caused him to be nearly arrested by secret temple policemen, who were among the listeners, on account of his blasphemy to the fish-demigod Dagon. He barely escaped imprisonment after showing the letter from the king and bribing them sizably.

That evening the lumber merchant searched Jonah, asking people whereabouts of the prophet. Everyone with a knowing look directed him in wrong directions, and eventually a night watch, after taking much money from him, took him in outskirts of the city, and the prophet was found praying in a cave hewn out in a rock to be used as a tomb for a wealthy man. The merchant urged him to escape from Nineveh with him before it was destroyed. Jonah disagreed. So the merchant quitted the city alone by night, without settling what could have been lucrative business with the king.

This incident did not fail to bring about a consequence. Although people did not believe what the foreign merchant had said, they loved to gossip this story, especially those who hated the fish-demigod Dagon; and the rumor of Jonah's miracle rose like an early spring wind the next day. The fact that he smelled so fishy was well-explained by the rumor, and they said that the strangeness of his face color was caused by the bleaching effect of the whale's gastric juice.

However, no sooner had they known that the lumber merchant was no longer found in the city and probably left it in secrecy without receiving a leave from the king, than the Ninevites at last began to suspect what the merchant had said was not entirely untrue including Jonah's being actually a true prophet of some "living" god.

A shabby man walking throughout the city, everyday unflinchingly chanting the same prophecy of Nineveh's destruction but for Ninevites' repentance, at the door of every house and to everyone he met on the street, and meaningfully dropping a pebble each day from his bag, began to scare the people, who knew they were over bad.

Jonah's sandals were worn-out and his toe nails had dark reddish color owing to internal bleeding. On earlier days, Jonah chanted with a loud strong voice with forceful gesture, but now he got weaker and his gesture disappeared, and slowly his voice got husky and finally was hard to hear unless one was close enough to him to experience the unbearable smell. He now had to use a stick for walking. The fewer were the pebbles in his bag each day, the heavier did he feel the bag nonetheless.

But it was when Jonah's voice at last lost sound that people began to repent their sins. On the morning of the yet-three-pebble day, as Jonah was prophesying, suddenly his voice stopped coming out, but he kept moving his lips, and a man who had been listening to Jonah began pronouncing what Jonah had been repeating. It was as if this man were a ventriloquist and Jonah a puppet chanting the prophecy:

"Fellow citizens of Nineveh,

Hear the words of Jehovah:

Repent and drop wrongdoings.

Fear God and stop evildoings.

For if *we* ever continue *our* sinful ways,

He shall exterminate *our* city in *three* days!"

Thereafter, repenters came to Jonah one after another, and as they walked with him, Jonah did not lack ventriloquists who gave voices to his voiceless lips.

By the noon of the yet-two-pebble day, the chanting group was divided into increasing number of sub-groups. Each made a few placards on which Jonah's prophecy was written, and they carried them throughout the city. The wooden placards attracted many because of their novelty although most citizens were unable to read. The whole city was in confusion. Crowds gathered at each public plaza, though most of them yet did not know what they had come for. Some were shouting one thing and others another.

Gradually, the words on the placards were put in the mouths of the people, and the city was echoed with the chants of Jonah's prophecy. Some started fasting, others whitened their bodies with ash and put on sackcloth, and prayed for pardon.

Those who were seen in the middle of wrongdoing were soon surrounded by a crowd who condemned them and demanded repentance. Idols were destroyed and burnt at every major plaza, and the ritual of child sacrifice was interrupted by people, who threatened to sacrifice instead the priests that conducted the ritual, and thus the priests including the Chief Priest fled from Nineveh.

This revolution in the city caused by Jonah was soon reported to the king. To the royal family, it was a welcome change that people repented and stopped sinning, and lived more like lambs than wolves. However, the people did not live like lambs but surged to the palace and wanted the king to repent too. They brought the placards to the gate of the palace and chanted Jonah's prophecy. The excited crowd seemed to keep staying

until and unless the king in person should appear and declare his repentance in front of them.

The king of Nineveh was not slow to anticipate the impending riot, and declared that he too would repent. As the crowd watched, the king took off his royal robe and changed into dark sackcloth and poured ash from a pot over his head, as he shouted, "I repent! I hereby repent and shall fear the god of Jonah!"

The ministers and members of the royal family and servants of all the ranks followed the king, repenting loudly, burning their coats, and pouring the ash of the coats over their head, and praying to the god of Jonah for pardon and mercy.

On the morning of the yet-one-pebble day, the king of Nineveh proclaimed that all the citizens and their animals should fast and should not even drink water. Then, at the sunset of that day, the king ordered that people should pour ash over their heads and wear sackcloth and pray all night aloud to the god of Jonah for mercy, swearing they would never do unrighteous things.

People obeyed the orders from the palace. Thus, the not-a-pebble day heard many prayers for forgiveness and songs blessing the god of Jonah, and passed peacefully without taking any mortal's life with it. Hence the song sung by Ninevites those days:

Not a person to the earth fell, oh Jonah,

When not a pebble from your finger fell.

Not an animal to the ground fell, oh Jonah,

When not a pebble from your finger fell.

So, Jonah was successful and fulfilled his mission assigned by God. On that day, the fishy smell left his body and his face skin began to recover radiance, although he could not yet recover his voice.

The Ninevites, knowing that they were not punished on the fixed day, came to Jonah and worshipped him from a distance. They wished him well, and said “You rescued us. You are the glory of Nineveh, the great pride of us. You are the high honor of Nineveh. May you be forever blessed by the heavenly God!”

Then, some, finding that he was no longer smelling, came close to him and bowed at his feet; a barber came with a basin filled with water and washed and trimmed his hair, and another washed his feet with perfumed oil. A skilled cobbler gave him a new pair of sandals he made for him, and a rich family gave him clothes to change in including a fine robe with hood.

At sunset, the order for fasting was lifted, and people gathered round Jonah with wine and food for celebration, and Jonah was given wine and food of choice and was crowned with a laurel. Some women performed a dance for him.

A herald came from the palace, and said that the king wanted Jonah to come to the palace so that he could express his gratitude toward the prophet. The herald let Jonah ride on a donkey he had brought from the palace. Soon a procession was formed with people marching before and behind Jonah, many carrying torches and more shouting, "Jonah, the reviver from a whale! Jonah, the true servant of the true God!"

When someone proposed that they should ask the king to appoint Jonah as the new Chief Priest, the chorus was changed to "Long live Jonah, the new Chief Priest, a prophet begotten by a whale!" People played musical instruments and many danced as the procession started toward the palace.

However, Jonah was unhappy, and unwilling to do anything, let alone meeting the king.

Jonah thought:

"Did I really desire this? - that the people of Nineveh should be saved from God's punishment? No, I can't say I did. What I desired was to please God. I feared my God and tried to be loyal to Him, and that only because I had realized I could not escape from Him anyhow. Do I love this people of Nineveh? No, I don't. I can't. I can never do so. I can scarcely forget the day when my parents were murdered by the plunderers from this same Nineveh. I thought it lucky that I had bad smell, because the detestable Ninevites did not come too close to me. Without passion for saving the Ninevites, I only tried to methodically carry out God's order on each one of the forty days. As it were, I was nothing more than a puppet manipulated by God. It did not matter to me whether the people of Nineveh were annihilated or saved. I was only interested in becoming a perfect puppet that dances and chants exactly as God willed.

"There is no doubt about my loving God, for I thank Him for answering my desperate prayers that I uttered from the depths, writhing in that slippery stomach of the whale, with eerie animals swirling about me; and when I was saved, I decided to offer everything left of me to God. And I now have completed my mission with a perfect result. But what is this emptiness, dissatisfaction...this loneliness? Being unable to partake of the joy these men and women are feeling so cheerfully, I certainly have come to have a wooden heart of a puppet. Yes, I am like a puppet that politely bows on the stage at the end of a show toward the cheering, applauding audience; the polite bow however is a mere heartless dipping of the head caused by slackening of a string. A puppet cannot be expected to have a feeling. Thus it is with me too that the joyous cheering of the Ninevites does not excite me, does not warm me at all. Oh, God, Jonah on the run from you was yet a man, but Jonah in Nineveh has been a puppet. Yeah, exactly like that wooden puppet that was swallowed by the whale with me. How he danced nonstop merrily, tossed and twisted by that tumultuous pool of sea animals, without ever stopping that smile!

"Oh, my God, you have saved the crooked Ninevites using me! And you gave them no less than forty days to repent. But you did not even try to warn my father and mother when the plunderers from Nineveh attacked my town and killed my parents while I was watching! Nevertheless, you used me to save the Ninevites...the born villains, rotten to the core! I cannot make head or tail of what you will. Oh, how would I have been proud of myself only if it were some other people that I helped survive!"

By now the procession had come in view of the palace and as people got nearer to it the louder they got. Their chorus lost unison and became a meaningless clamor, their music lost harmony and their dancing became rhythmless, and with that Jonah's loneliness turned to anger.

"Ah, what an irritating din they are making. Oh, God, why are these people making such a hideous noise? Certainly they could thank you in a more peaceful manner...Oh, yes! This is it! The same craziness! I remember they were making exactly the same uproar as this in triumph when they sacked the town of my birth!

"My God, you should have done away with this people, as I often have pleaded with you. This people you just saved today will sooner or later relapse into the habit of wrong-doings and barbaric rituals. These people are no longer thinking of you, they are thinking only of themselves. Who knows they might set me up as a new god? ...Did you hear that? This man just asked me to make him a priest when I am assigned as the new Chief Priest. Their repentance is a mere makeshift. ...Oh, but only the ones who first repented and walked with me saying the words I could no longer utter are truthful ones. But where are they now? If I saw them joyous, even I might have been able to share their joy and be happy and... Can it be that they *were*...?"

"Oh, God, these people are advancing to the palace to have me appointed as the Chief Priest. But, you will see, as soon as the procession is inside the palace, they will cast me aside and start looting the treasures. Look! some are already at the palace gate and are scrambling for the ornaments attached to it.

“Oh my God, what a waste of time and labor! It is not yet too late! Do, please, do away with this hateful people soon. I will have gone outside the city by the sunrise. Or else, please do away with me... Ah, what a terrible thing am I gibbering out! Pardon me, my Lord, I am delirious.”

Then, Jonah heard a voice of God: "Jonah, is your anger just?"

"My Lord ...maybe not. But my anger is beyond my control. After all, I cannot forgive the Ninevites who were the deaths of my father and mother. And I am well aware that, as a servant of Yours, this is the greatest of all my misfortunes."

[Verses 5 - 11, Chapter 4, Book of Jonah, follow]:

Thereafter, Jonah went outside the city, to the east thereof, and rested. He then set up a shelter to live in. He sat in its half shade and waited to see how the city would be dealt with.

Then, Lord God created a gourd, which quickly climbed the shelter and its green leaves provided a pleasant shadow over him, to the greatest jubilation of the prophet.

But at dawn the next day God had a worm chew all the leaves of the gourd so that it became leafless.

At sunrise God brought forth a scorching wind from the east. The sun shot Jonah's head till he grew nearly faint. He felt so wretched that he wanted to die, and whined to God, "I would be better off dead than alive."

But God said to Jonah, "Do you really want to be dead because of your anger about the gourd?"

"I do," said Jonah. "I am so angry that I can die!"

Then, God said, "What a moving thing it is for you to mortally miss a gourd which you did not even plant or grow, but grew up on its own over a night and withered over the next! If so, indeed you should be able to appreciate at least a modicum of my feeling! Look at the huge city of Nineveh. There are no less than a hundred and twenty thousand people living here who cannot even tell right from wrong, and there are a huge number of cattle, too. Would I make myself a laughing stock if I, the creator of them all, cherish them sometimes?"

End

p.s. "It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved." John 3:17

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