

I. Introduction

A. Steve Fritz, Sheri's cousin, was one the members of the 1996 US Olympic Track and Field team that competed in Atlanta. He was a decathlete and as you can see from this picture, he got 4th.

1. I only met him once – at a family wedding. He is fairly soft spoken, but I can attest that he looked like a guy who could run faster and jump higher than anyone else.
2. Chances are you do not remember Steve, in part because he finished fourth in a year in which another American, Dan O'Brien won the gold.

B. It all came down to the last event – the 1500 meter. Steve was in third going into that event. O'Brien was in first. There was a young kid out of Germany who had come out of nowhere – peaking at exactly the right time. He was having PR after PR. He was in 2nd.

1. But the way the decathlon is scored, Fritz could win it all. O'Brien was a first day guy. He did best in the first five events. Steve was a second day guy. He often came from behind. If he beat O'Brien by enough in the metric mile he would get enough points for gold. It was possible, O'Brien hated the 1,500. In fact, he'd been known to cry before the race started, he hated it so much.

C. You can imagine how excited we were. This was family! And a gold medal in the decathlon was claim to being the best athlete in the world. Now, I wasn't actually related by blood to Steve – in fact, Sheri wasn't either. I said Steve was her cousin. Not actually. Sheri's grandfather had died before her own father was born. Her grandmother had remarried Steve's grandfather – who had lost her husband. Steve's grandfather was the only grandfather Sheri had known. So, they felt like cousins, but they were only step cousins.

D. It was going to be a stretch for me to claim that Sheri's step cousin winning the decathlon confirmed that I was a great athlete. But I was prepared to make the claim.

E. As it goes, in the final race – the metric mile - Steve made a very serious move to win it all. And he opened up quite a lead on the entire field in the third of four laps. It looked like he just might do it. And then... he hit the wall and the field caught him. And at the end the person in fourth beat him by just a few seconds, which gave him the bronze medal.

1. Fourth in the Olympics is the place you do not want to finish.
For what it's worth, his point total would have won a gold medal in the two previous Olympics. And his second day score was an Olympic record.

F. But he missed by an Olympic medal by a whisper.

G. I called Steve this week to ask him how he reflects on that 20 years later, because I thought there might be something there for us. I will circle back to it at the end.

II. Right now, let me circle back to Jonah and make sure you are ready for chapter three.

A. In the first two chapters we established that:

1. Jonah was a reluctant Hebrew prophet who was not interested in warning Israel's enemy about God's coming judgement. So, when given an assignment to tell the people in Nineveh to repent or be judged, he tried to run away.
2. We've noted that this is never a good idea and further noted that in his case it led to him being thrown off a ship, sinking to the bottom of the ocean and being swallowed by a great fish.
3. We also noted that at that point he cried Uncle. He repented – or appeared to. He thanked God for saving him from certain death – literally from the “belly of death” - at which point he was spit out on dry land. And this is where we are going to pick things up.

B. Along the way I have also noted that: 1) This isn't a fish story; 2) It is a powerful literary work, with lots of symbolism, word plays and nuance going on; 3) It drips with irony. Jonah is against offering mercy to others when it is so obvious, he needs mercy himself; and 4) it points to Jesus. Jonah's life foreshadows Jesus.

III. We now pick up in chapter 3. **Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:**² “**Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”**

A. Both the New American Standard Version and the English Standard Version, use the word “Arise.” I think it's a miss by the NIV team not to. This goes back to chapter 1 and it contrasts with Jonah doing the opposite, going down to Nineveh, down into the boat and down to the bottom of the ocean.

IV.³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. There are conflicting interpretations here.

A. Some say the phrase “a visit required three days” means “you can't see all the sites in less than three days. You can't do the Art Institute, Field Museum, take in a Cubs Game, eat Giordano's, the observation deck at Hancock in less than three days.”

B. Others believe that this was how long it took to walk around it. Some of those in this camp say it was huge. That it had more than 60 miles of walls

C. Others say what is being referenced here is not Nineveh proper but the greater metropolitan area.

1. When people say “Chicago” they mean different things.

2. Some mean the city itself. Others refer to anything within a three hour drive.

- a) About a week after we moved out here over twenty years ago – and our boys where young – we told them that we were going to take them to Chicago.
- b) They said, “We live in Chicago.”
- c) No, we live in Lake Bluff. We haven’t been to Chicago.
- d) But we told everyone we were moving to Chicago.
- e) Right. And we sort of did. But not really.
- f) We lied to all our friends?
- g) No.

D. We are not entirely certain how to understand this. What we do know is that Nineveh is a great and an important place. And that Jonah is again sent to go there and preach to the people. To put a stop to all of their marauding, pillaging and terrorizing.

V. Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” Wow. This would be a hard message to deliver. For starters, he has to be thinking, “OK Lord. I give myself about twenty minutes before someone rips my arm off and starts beating me over the head with it.

A. The easy parallel here is to imagine how a Jew would feel if their assignment was to go into Nazi Germany in the early 40s and condemn Hitler. They can’t expect to live long. But to his shock, they do not beat him up, laugh or ignore him. They respond.

VI. ⁵The Ninevites believed God. Later on you are going to see, this is one of the responses Jonah was worried about. But probably not the one he expected. He had to be worried that he was going to get beat up.

A. As a speaker I can tell you that if I think things are going to go poorly they do. Occasionally, God shows up and clearly moves and it goes well. It exceeds my expectations. It is more likely that I think things will go well and they do not.

1. I’m thinking mostly of preaching. But one of my more memorable speaking disasters was as a consultant. I had a presentation to give to a bunch of university librarians. There were three libraries at the university, and they were on three different systems. I was helping combine them. I had an associate working with me. And as the day long sessions rolled on I remembered thinking, we are going to get beat up.” And a bit later I thought, beat up nothing. I am about to be killed. How embarrassing will that be. Killed by a bunch of librarians.

B. The text doesn't say much about how things unfolded. But ancient historians have noted that around the time of Jonah's mission, the Assyrians had experienced a series of famines, plagues and eclipses – all of which they likely saw as omens of worse things to come. Some have suggested that this may have been God's way of preparing them for Jonah's message. They would have been ready for a foreign prophet.

C. Maybe, God can engineer these things however he wants to do it.

VII. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

A. A gunny sack. They took off their Armani tunics and silk robes and covered themselves in burlap.

B. The idea of ashes and sack cloth is to adopt a posture of humility. Ashes carry overtones of darkness and death. This is part of what is behind Ash Wednesday. Smearing ashes on your forehead is a statement about sin and death.

VIII. ⁶When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.¹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

A. We do not have any examples of the Jews being so serious about a fast that they forced it upon their animals as well.²

B. I'm not sure what to do about the animals fasting other than to say that the Assyrians were scared and realized that they were about to face the righteous wrath of God.

IX. ¹⁰When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. In other words – God had mercy on the Assyrians.

A. Now for what it's worth, the text is a bit vague, but it doesn't appear as though Jonah called them to salvation and there was a great revival. The text uses the generic term for God – Elohim - not LORD. And there is no mention of them turning from their idols or of offering sacrifices to God.

B. It seems as though Jonah said the least he could – i.e., that their cruelty was going to get them in trouble with God - and the king felt guilty enough to realize that just might happen. Given what they did to other people they likely had a guilty conscience.

1. They slaughtered and enslaved people, oppressed the poor, skinned people alive. Led people around by hooks they put through their cheeks. They likely felt a bit guilty.

C. I tease this out a bit because if you read the commentaries, some suggest that there was a revival – that Jonah preached the Gospel and they all came to faith. And others say, “Jonah did not preach the Gospel, he just showed kindness and that is what we should do. The way forward isn’t about evangelism but about social action. No, Jonah didn’t do social action.³ He told people about the wrath of God against sin. We are called to both share the Good News and Engage in Good Works.

X. This sets up Jonah 4 – which is next week. The surprising ending. It deals with a plant and Jonah’s frustration and the lesson God tries to teach Jonah. Today I want to make two observations about this passage.

A. I thought about talking about judgment. It’s not popular today to talk about God judging us, or cultures.

1. I remember when our popular culture argued that we should all live as we wished, and demanded that no one judge anyone else. And then we said, we are all free to make up our own truth, and people got very judgmental of anyone who was judgmental of this claim – they were intolerant of anyone who was intolerant.
2. In the last eighteen months, society has become openly judgmental. Cancel Culture is – by definition - a willingness of people to force a standard.

B. There is a lot to think about as it relates to judgment. But I have spoken about judgment with some frequency. We will push that off for another day. I want to note two other matters.

XI. Let me start by underlining the term repentance.

A. It is the theme of this book. The Hebrew term *shub* - which means “to turn” - is used four times in our passage today. This is what we are supposed to dial in on.

B. The Book starts with God telling Jonah to tell the Ninevites to repent. Then the sailors on the boat repent. Then Jonah himself repents. Then he is back calling on the Ninevites to repent.

C. The book is not about a fish, it is very much about repenting. And it’s not just Jonah making this point, the Gospels open this way, with John the Baptist calling on people to repent. And then the first thing Jesus says when he begins his ministry is repent.

D. And the first of Luther’s 95 theses was on our need to have a lifestyle of repenting.

XII. The last thing I want to note takes me a bit off script. It goes back to Steve Fritz. And it’s more of a general comment, to be made:

A. After a week of snow and bitter-cold in Chicago;

B. After nearly a year of COVID lock down;

- C. After nearly a year of racial tension and frustration;
- D. After a contentious election followed by an assault on the capital, followed by an impeachment, followed by hundreds of thousands of hours of acrimonious political theater;
- E. After a year in which some of you have lost jobs or opportunities.
- F. I want to encourage you to keep putting one foot in front of the other. I want to encourage you to be resilient. I want to encourage you to take the next faithful step. I want to encourage you to get back up again, even though you have been knocked down again.
- G. I know that many of you are exhausted or discouraged.
- H. I'm sorry. There have been a few things that happened this week that led me to think, some people are losing hope or resolve or need a hug or a vacation or something.
- I. I get it. It occurred to me that Jonah had to clean himself up and find some strength to move on. And that is what made me think – in an odd way – of Steve Fritz.
- J. You do not go to the Olympics to get fourth.
- K. So I called him and asked, Reflect on the Olympics from 20 years out.
- L. He's spent most of the last twenty years as a Track Coach at K-State. More recently he has been coaching High School Basketball.
- M. And he said, "I knew when I crossed the finish line and saw the coach for the athlete that had just passed me that jumping up and down that I had lost the bronze. And I went over and sat down in the infield for a moment and thought about what I was going to do.
- N. And I decided, I was not going to dwell on my loss. I was going to keep moving forward. So, I went over and congratulated those who won and I haven't let it hold me back.
- O. I share this because it seems like good advice at a moment like this. Jonah shows a bit of the right attitude in verse 3. He will loose it again by chapter four. Don't let that happen to you.
- P. Repentance and Resilience are the themes of the day.

¹ The way this is formatted has led some scholars to note that the violence they had intended may have been against each other. They further note that violent societies tend to turn on each other.

² Animals cannot sin. They are not moral agents. Animals do what they were created to do. Your dog might look guilty when you catch it doing what he or she has been trained not to do. And they will run away with their tale between their legs. But that is not guilt as much as its fear. They are expecting a swat.

³ See Keller, Prodigal Prophet, p.91.