

There is actually a medical term for Nebuchadnezzar's condition.

It is called "boanthropy" –
a term that means "a person who thinks that he is a cow."

Once upon a time (way back in the rationalist 20th century)
commentators had to assure readers that such things really can happen.

But in our day of identity politics,
we are not surprised anymore when someone has some sort of "body dysmorphia"
and they think that they are (or should be) someone or something else!

Of course, in the ancient world, there are all sorts of stories like this –
suggesting that such afflictions have always been with us –
they have just been interpreted and explained in all sorts of different ways.

There is no other record of Nebuchadnezzar's madness –
but then again, ancient kings tended not to appreciate negative publicity –
and even after his death,
Nebuchadnezzar remained a powerful and influential symbol,
so it is not surprising that no other record remains.

The central theme of this chapter is found in the "refrain" as it were, in verses 17, 25, and 32:
"the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will."

The book of Daniel is not concerned with the question of an abstract "right" to rule,
but rather with who is the *de facto* ruler of a given territory.

To put it simply, God has *given* the United States to Donald Trump.
And he has given Russia to Vladimir Putin.
And he has given North Korea to Kim Jong-il.
And he has given South Bend to Pete Buttigieg.

Whether a ruler comes by election, conquest, or any other method –
God is the one who rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.

1. "His Kingdom Is an Everlasting Kingdom" – The Proclamation (v1-3)

King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! ² It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.

³ How great are his signs,
how mighty his wonders!

*His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and his dominion endures from generation to generation.*

Verses 1-3 serve as a prelude to the story.

Nebuchadnezzar himself issues a proclamation acknowledging the mighty deeds of the Most High God.

2. “The Most High Rules the Kingdom of Men” – The Dream (v4-18)

⁴ I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. ⁵ I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me. ⁶ So I made a decree that all the wise men of Babylon should be brought before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream. ⁷ Then the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers came in, and I told them the dream, but they could not make known to me its interpretation.

We saw a couple weeks ago that in the first dream
(in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign)
the king refused to tell the wise men the dream –
but insisted that they tell *him* what he had dreamed –
and *then* explain the dream.

Now we are further into Nebuchadnezzar’s reign.
There is no nervousness in the King – at least regarding the wise men.
They are now fully under his control!

And that’s the problem!
Because from the dream (as we hear it in the next few verses)
it is pretty obvious what the dream means!
If you think about the standards of “dream interpretation” in ancient Babylon,
it doesn’t take much to figure out that this dream is *bad news* for Nebuchadnezzar.
The failure of the magicians was not due to the particular difficulty of the dream –
but owed more to their fear of the king’s wrath
(since they would know that he would be furious!).

And so finally Daniel comes in.
You might think, if Daniel is so good at interpreting dreams,
why not call for Daniel first?!
Nebuchadnezzar reigned for 40 years.
We only know of *two* dreams that Daniel interpreted for him.

We tend to think of Daniel as this amazing interpreter –
but we have only these two moments in 40 years
when Daniel *ever* appeared before Nebuchadnezzar.
Some have said that if Daniel was so great – we should have heard about him
from the Babylonian records.
But if you read the book of Daniel carefully
(and especially if you read it in the light of its ancient context)

Daniel is revealed as an obscure magician
who was greatly honored twice in 40 years.

⁸ At last Daniel came in before me—he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods

Notice that Nebuchadnezzar is still a thorough-going pagan.

He highlights the name of Bel – the name of “my god” –
and he speaks of the spirit in Daniel as the spirit of the holy gods.
Even in the act of praising the God of Daniel,
he is still a polytheist.

—and I told him the dream, saying, ⁹ “O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you and that no mystery is too difficult for you, tell me the visions of my dream that I saw and their interpretation.

Verse 9 likewise speaks of Daniel as “chief of the magicians.”

That is an interesting title for a Christian!
But it is essential for us to remember that the Christian
is called to seek the welfare of the city where he lives (Jeremiah 29).
The Christian is not a revolutionary – but a reformer.
The Christian does not seek to overthrow the rulers of this age –
but to serve them and honor them in such a way
as to help them to rule better and longer.

¹⁰ The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. ¹¹ The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. ¹² Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it.

¹³ “I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. ¹⁴ He proclaimed aloud and said thus: ‘Chop down the tree and lop off its branches, strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the beasts flee from under it and the birds from its branches. ¹⁵ But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, amid the tender grass of the field. Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. ¹⁶ Let his mind be changed from a man's, and let a beast's mind be given to him; and let seven periods of time pass over him. ¹⁷ The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.’ ¹⁸ This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw. And you, O Belteshazzar, tell me the interpretation, because all the wise men of my kingdom are not able to make known to me the interpretation, but you are able, for the spirit of the holy gods is in you.”

And so Nebuchadnezzar describes the dream.

The vision of the tree that reached up to heaven
and whose branches spread over all the earth
echoes Ezekiel 31 (where Pharaoh is the great tree),
and Ezekiel 17 (where the king of Jerusalem is a smaller tree!).

This same language is used in Psalm 80 – “you brought a vine from Egypt
and planted it in the land...” –

Psalm 80 is also from the time of the Exile
(since the song talks about how the vine was “uprooted”)

This may suggest that Daniel himself was the scribe who composed Nebuchadnezzar’s letter.
(Given that ancient kings regularly relied upon scribes to compose official letters,
you can easily imagine Nebuchadnezzar ordering Daniel to write a letter for him!
Which would also explain why the only copy of the letter we possess
comes from the Jews!)

Verses 13-17 then give the beginning of the interpretation!

The dream itself contains all that is needed for a right understanding of it!

Verse 17 then adds the source of the dream:

“The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.”

Who are “the watchers,” “the holy ones”?

Most commentators simply call them “angels,”
but “angel” is simply a transliteration of a Greek word that means “messenger.”
Paul seems to indicate that there are various orders of heavenly beings –
principalities and powers – thrones and dominions –
and “angel” or “messenger” would seem to be one of the *lower* orders.
The watchers – the holy ones – would seem to be a higher order.

But here in the dream itself, we see that the dream is not *directly* from God.

The dream is from the “watchers” – the “holy ones.”

They speak on behalf of God.

(Later Daniel will say that this is a “decree of the Most High”).

But God chooses not to speak directly to a pagan king.
He uses intermediaries – the “watchers” – to communicate his decree.

What should we make of this?

Have you ever had a dream that really frightened you?

How should you interpret dreams?

Most dreams are just ordinary dreams.

But as we saw this morning from Psalm 104,

God rules over all things –
even your dreams!

So how should you interpret your dreams?!

Well, think about Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams.

What action is called for in his dream?

Humble yourself and submit to God.

Practice righteousness and show mercy to the oppressed.

In other words, there is no “new revelation” here.

The dream simply confirms all that God has said in his word –
and warns that God will judge those who refuse.

I’ve had dreams like that!

The part that is *unique* to Nebuchadnezzar is the *specific* penalty.

(And I would be wary of trusting such specifics today.

Daniel had a specific role in redemptive history,
and he was specifically gifted in the interpretation of dreams).

So the simple way to put it is that insofar as your dreams are calling you to humble yourself
and do righteousness and show mercy to the oppressed,
you should understand that God is using your dreams to call you to repentance.

But dreams are not inherently trustworthy.

Dreams and visions can point in all sorts of different directions –
some may come purely from our own minds –
while others may have demonic sources.

So it is best to think of dreams in the way that you think of the news media –
as a source of information – more or less reliable –
sometimes accurate,
and sometimes producing “fake news.”

(I have certainly had dreams that were “fake news”!)

Dreams are *never* to be used as the *determinative* guide to action.

Notice the adjective: determinative.

The infallible guide for *action* is the Word of God.

All sorts of information may be used as supplementary guides.
But only the Word of God is the infallible guide.

Scripture gives us a really good example in Acts 16.

Paul is looking for the next place to go and preach the gospel.

We are told in Acts 16:7 that the “Spirit of Jesus did not allow them”
to go into Bithynia.

(I will admit that it is a little frustrating not to have more information here!)

What does it mean that the “Spirit of Jesus did not allow them”!?)

But however he did it, the Spirit made it clear that going to Bithynia was not an option.

So Paul and Silas and Timothy are looking for a place to go and preach the gospel.

And in the night, Paul has a vision of a man of Macedonia saying,

“Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

Notice that the vision occurs in the context of Paul’s attempt to identify his next mission field.

He has been praying – asking God for direction –

and in that context, he has a vision that directs him in his path –

a path that was already set in the context of the prophets and teachers

in the church in Antioch (Acts 13).

So to put this in a modern context,

if someone who had never thought about being a missionary came to me and said,

“God told me in a dream that he wants me to leave tomorrow

to be a missionary to Tibet” –

I would be skeptical.

(Sort of like the guy who tells a girl: “God told me that you are supposed to marry me.”)

God is not a cosmic fortune teller who goes around putting wild fancies in people’s heads!

He certainly might use such a dream to knock some sense into a young person’s head –

but even Barnabas and Saul were required to go through the ordinary process

of being called and set apart by the *church*.

So if someone who was preparing to be a missionary came to me after much prayer,

and said, I had a dream about a Tibetan Buddhist monk putting his faith in Christ –

I would take very seriously his pursuit of doing missions there.

Like I said earlier –

dreams are *not* definitive guides – they are simply “news” –

information to be tossed in the hopper along with all the rest,

and then subordinated to the Word of God which must direct our paths!

And particularly, since the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,

we should recognize that a decisive corner has been turned in redemptive history.

Hebrews 1 – which we read this morning –

says that in times past, God spoke to our fathers in various ways,

but in these last days, God has spoken by his Son.

In other words, we shouldn’t expect the *old ways* to continue.

Verse 19 tells us that Daniel...

3. “It Is You, O King” – The Interpretation (v19-27)

¹⁹ Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him.

Daniel immediately understands what the dream means –
and he recognizes (just like the wise men of Babylon)
that Nebuchadnezzar is *not* going to like the interpretation.
But *unlike* the wise men of Babylon,
Daniel is not driven by the fear of man.

This is the key for the Christian who serves in the courts of kings –
or even for the Christian who serves in middle-level management!
Daniel is not worried about his own reputation – his own position.
He serves the LORD God of heaven and earth.
And therefore, he serves Nebuchadnezzar – the pagan king – wisely and faithfully.

He wants Nebuchadnezzar to rule well – and long.
Sure, in one sense, Daniel would long for the Son of David to sit on the throne –
but that is with respect to the City of God.
Daniel also resides in the city of Man.
And Nebuchadnezzar is the King of Babylon – the epicenter of the city of Man.

For Daniel to be faithful in his duties as a servant of God Most High,
he must help Nebuchadnezzar to become the best king he can possibly be.

You must help your boss to become the best boss that he can possibly be!

How can you help your boss establish a righteous and just community at work?
If you are not helping your boss do justice –
if you are just serving your time and “doing your job” –
then you are more like the Chaldeans than you are like Daniel!

(Incidentally, *this* more than anything else is why I can’t stand the song
“Dare to Be a Daniel”!
The song “Dare to Be a Daniel” is all about standing alone *against* the world.
But Daniel stood alone *for the sake* of the world – for the sake of the King –
even the pagan Nebuchadnezzar!)

Yes, he confronts Nebuchadnezzar –
but not in defiance of the King! –
he calls Nebuchadnezzar to repentance, for the sake of the King!

And in the rest of verse 19, you hear the confidence that the King has in Daniel –
and you hear Daniel’s wise and gracious reply:

The king answered and said, "Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you." Belteshazzar answered and said, "My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!"

And then Daniel explains the dream very simply and plainly.

²⁰ The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, ²¹ whose leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived— ²² it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth. ²³ And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, 'Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him,' ²⁴ this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, ²⁵ that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. ²⁶ And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules.

The tree is the King.

You are the man!

When you give the King bad news,

you want to make it clear that you honor him –

"Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven,

and your dominion to the ends of the earth."

and you want to deflect the consequences:

"may this never happen to you!"

But at the same time,

Daniel offers Nebuchadnezzar a way to escape the consequences.

After all, Daniel knows the prophetic tradition of his people:

God never sends a prophet with a warning

unless it is possible to escape the threatened judgment.

Think of Jonah – he refused to go to Nineveh because he knew that God is merciful!

And he wanted God to destroy the Assyrians!!

And think of Elisha –

he had a house in Samaria – the king's city –

because Elisha did not preach against the house of Ahab the way that Elijah did!

Elijah preached against the house of Ahab regularly –

calling them to repentance.

But before God took Elijah up into heaven,

God made it clear that the time had passed for the house of Ahab to repent. Elisha was sent to *destroy* the house of Ahab – not call it to repentance! So you simply don't find Elisha preaching against the house of Ahab! (The irony is that the house of Ahab seems to have thought that Elisha was more friendly!)

Daniel understands that the dream is a final warning to Nebuchadnezzar:

"Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity."

Do righteousness.
Show mercy to the oppressed.

This is the message that we need to bring to *all* those who are in positions of authority.

Turn away from sin.
Repent.
Practice righteousness.
Establish justice.
Make sure that your community is ordered in such a way
that the weak and helpless are protected.

Honestly?

This dream was *easy* to interpret.
Nebuchadnezzar himself *probably* understood it (in one sense) without Daniel.

But here's the problem:
he didn't *like* the interpretation!

He didn't *want to know* what it meant!

This is the problem we all face!
Pastor, how can I have a better marriage?
Well, you could lay down your life for your spouse – like Christ loved the church!
I'd rather not... Any other ideas?

You already *know* how to be a good person:
love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength –
and love your neighbor as yourself!
He has told you, O man, what is good,
and what does the LORD require of you but to love justice
and to do mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God! (Micah 6:8)

It's not complicated!

The Christian life is *profoundly* simple!

The problem is that we are too much like Nebuchadnezzar!

4. “The Most High Rules the Kingdom of Men” – The Fulfillment (v28-33)

²⁸ All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, ³⁰ and the king answered and said, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?”

I don't know about you – but I tend to pat myself on the back
and say, “look at these great things that I have done!”

We make ourselves the center of the universe.

As though heaven and earth revolve around us!
Or, at least, as though my *family* revolves around *me*...
and if *my wishes* are not followed, there will be hell to pay!!

You... are the Nebuchadnezzar of your own little personal Babylon!

And the warning comes to you – in your little, tiny kingdom –
just as it did to that king who ruled over all the earth!

³¹ While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, “O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, ³² and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” ³³ Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws.

Think about what happens to Nebuchadnezzar:

his dwelling is the with the beasts of the field;
he eats grass like an ox;
and his hair grows as long as eagles' feathers,
and his nails like birds' claws...

Man is turned into a beast.

Because he has refused to accept that he is but the *image* of God,
he loses everything that distinguishes him from the animals!

If you insist on clinging to your petty little kingdom of one,
then you will one day face Nebuchadnezzar's fate!

Oh, not necessarily the particular details of eating grass like an ox –
but the disintegration of your own personal kingdom.

It may still be there! (Babylon did not cease to be a great empire!)
But you will not be able to enjoy it.
God will *not* be mocked!
If you refuse to honor and glorify him,
then whatever honor and glory you have will be taken away!

The ESV is correct to say that Nebuchadnezzar's madness lasted for "seven periods of time."
Some have suggested that this means "seven years" –
but there is nothing in the text that requires such a meaning.
This is the word used in chapter 2 to say that God changes "times" and seasons –
or in chapter 3 to speak of the "time" when the three friends would hear the music
It is also the word used in chapter 7 of the "time" "times" and "half a time."

But the key is found in verse 32:

until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.

Until.

Here is the *mercy* that God showed to Nebuchadnezzar!
God's purpose was to humble this king and bring him to repentance!

The Most High *rules* the kingdom of men.

Some speak of the "two kingdoms" as though God rules the Kingdom of God,
and Satan rules the Kingdom of Man.

But no!

Daniel tells us that the Most High rules *everything*!

(And as Daniel 7 will make clear,
the Most High rules everything *through his Son* –
by whom he also made all things! Hebrews 1).

At the end of the chapter, there is a sort of "conversion" of Nebuchadnezzar:

5. "His Kingdom Endures" – The Conclusion (v34-37)

³⁴ *At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,*

and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;

³⁵ *all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,*
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand

or say to him, “What have you done?”

³⁶At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. ³⁷Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

Here, at the end of his life,

Nebuchadnezzar comes to praise and extol and honor the King of heaven.

He accepts the simple truth that *He* is God, and *I* am not.

Calvin says well that repentance “is the true-turning of our life to God,
a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of him;
and consists in the mortification [the putting to death] of our flesh
and of the old man,
and in the vivification [the coming to life] of the Spirit...
in a word, I interpret repentance as regeneration,
*whose sole end is to restore to us the image of God
that has been disfigured and all but obliterated.*” (in Ferguson, 96)

There is considerable debate over whether Nebuchadnezzar was converted
here at the end of his life.

I don't know!

It is possible that Nebuchadnezzar simply ordered Daniel to write up the decree,
signed it – and never thought about it again.

But if he actually *meant these words*,
if this expresses the heart of Nebuchadnezzar,
then the man who destroyed the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem
became a living stone in the heavenly temple that Jesus is building!

“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven,
for all his works are right and his ways are just;
and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.”

Those who exalt themselves will be humbled –
but those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Why?

Because the Son of God established this pattern for us!

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.
And being found in human form, he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
Therefore God has highly exalted him
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:6-11)