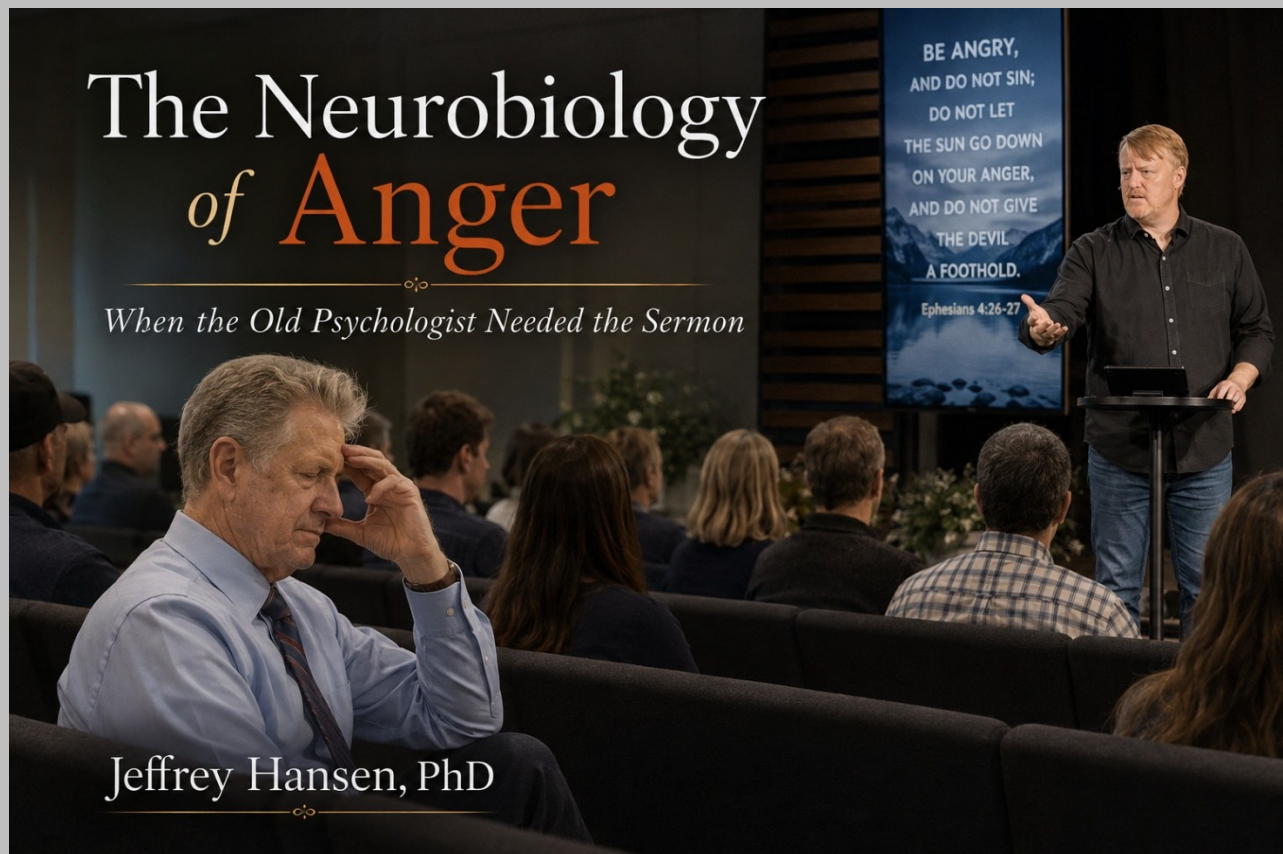




Every Once in a While, the Sermon Is About You

As I was sitting in church this morning, I found myself smiling. Pastor Whitney has this uncanny ability to preach sermons that seem as though they were written specifically for me. Sometimes I joke that he must have a webcam hidden in my office or perhaps some microscopic nanoprobe in my brain that's transmitting my thoughts directly into his sermon notes. Of course, neither is true. What is true is that spiritually sensitive pastors often possess a remarkable ability to discern what their people need to hear. They know their flock. They understand the human heart. And this morning, this old psychologist needed exactly what Pastor Whitney had to say.

You see, I've been wrestling with anger lately. That may surprise some people. After all, I've spent my career studying emotions, trauma, relationships, and the human brain. I've taught about anger. I've counseled people through it. I've helped countless individuals learn to regulate it. Yet as I sat quietly listening to the sermon, I was reminded of a humbling truth: understanding anger and mastering anger are two very different things. Knowledge is invaluable, but knowledge alone does not transform the heart. That realization prompted me to begin thinking about something I've never really written about before. What exactly is anger? Why is it so powerful? And why does Scripture speak about it with such urgency?

Anger Is More Than an Emotion

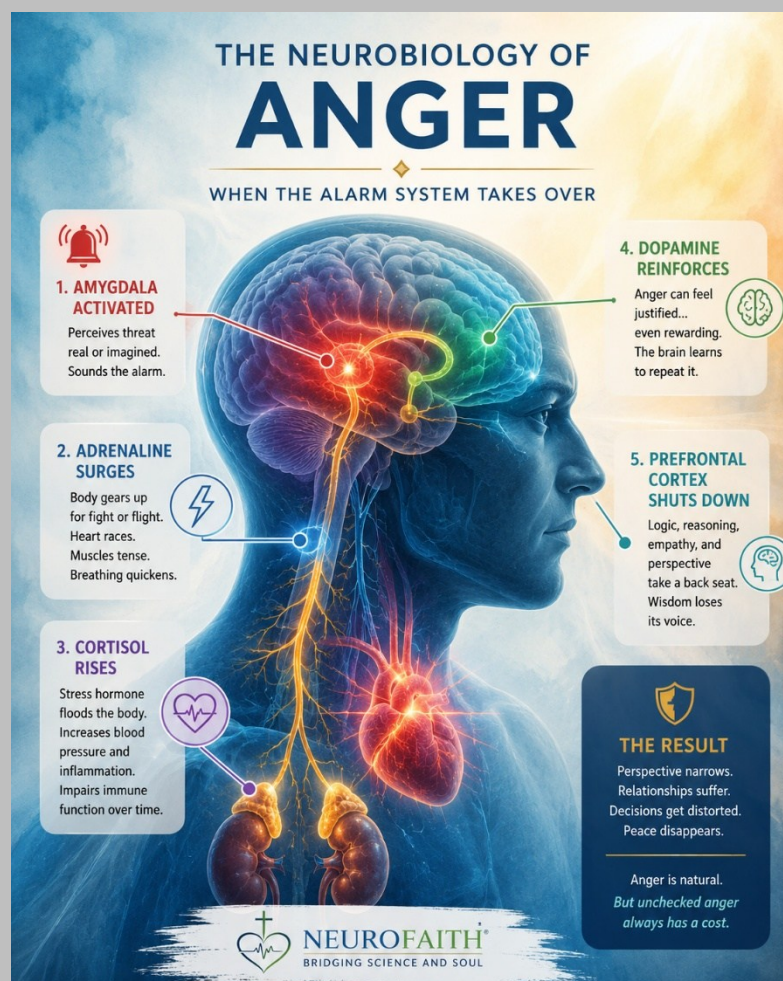
Most people think of anger as simply another emotion, no different than sadness, fear, or joy. Modern neuroscience paints a very different picture. Anger is not merely an emotional experience. It is a full-body physiological survival state. By the time we consciously recognize that we are angry, our brains have already begun reorganizing themselves. Blood flow shifts away from some regions and toward others. Hormones begin flooding the bloodstream. Neurotransmitters change. Heart rate accelerates. Muscles tighten. Breathing becomes faster and more shallow. The immune system begins responding. Even our cells begin adapting to what the brain believes is a dangerous world. In other words, anger is not simply something we feel. It is something our entire body becomes.

Everything begins deep within the brain in a small almond-shaped structure called the **amygdala**. Think of it as the brain's alarm system. Every moment of every day it asks one fundamental

question: "*Am I safe?*" The remarkable thing is that the amygdala does not wait for certainty. It was designed by God to err on the side of survival. If it perceives betrayal, humiliation, disrespect, rejection, or injustice, it responds almost instantly. Notice that word, *perceives*. The brain reacts to perceived danger almost as powerfully as actual danger. That is why a cutting remark, an unfair accusation, a public embarrassment, or the belief that we have been treated unjustly can activate the same ancient survival circuitry that once protected our ancestors from predators.

Within milliseconds, the amygdala signals the hypothalamus, and the body's survival machinery comes

online. Adrenaline floods the bloodstream. Blood pressure rises. The heart begins beating faster.



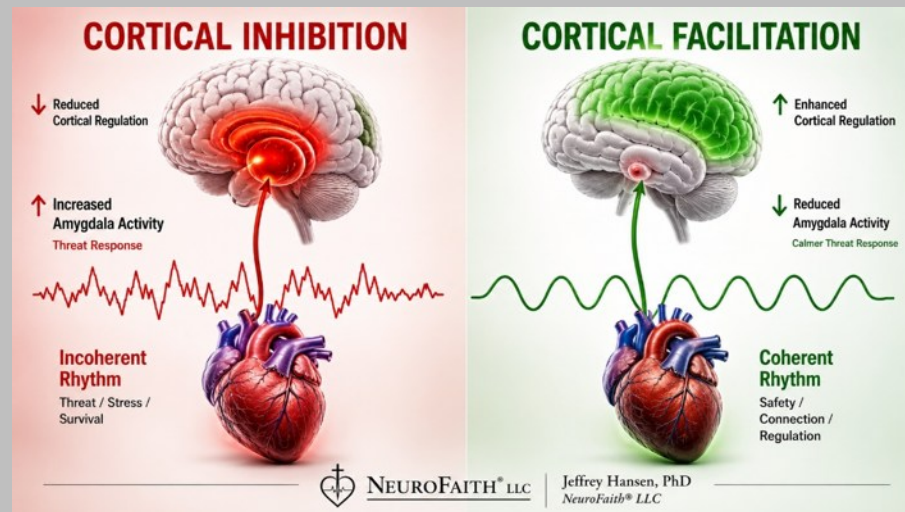
Blood is redirected away from digestion and toward the large muscles of the body. Vision narrows. Attention becomes fixed on the threat. If the situation continues, cortisol helps sustain that state of readiness. In the short term, this response is brilliantly adaptive. It enables us to survive genuine danger. But when anger lingers for days, weeks, or months, the very biology designed to protect us begins quietly working against us. The neurochemistry of anger is equally fascinating. **Dopamine**, the neurotransmitter we often associate with reward and motivation, may actually increase during episodes of anger, particularly when we feel morally justified or believe we have gained the upper hand. If our anger causes another person to back down, if we feel vindicated, or if we experience the satisfaction of “winning,” the brain learns something important: *That worked*. Dopamine reinforces the pathway. Over time we do not necessarily become addicted to anger itself. We may become addicted to the powerful sense of righteousness, control, or victory that anger temporarily produces. At the same time, **serotonin**, which helps stabilize mood and regulate impulses, becomes less influential, while **GABA**, the brain’s primary inhibitory neurotransmitter, struggles to keep pace with the surge of excitatory activity. The accelerator is pressed harder, **glutamate**, the brain’s primary excitatory neurotransmitter, increases while the brakes become less effective. We become more impulsive, more rigid, more certain that we are right, and less capable of seeing another person’s perspective.

One of the greatest misconceptions about anger is that the thinking brain simply “shuts down.” It doesn’t. Something even more interesting happens. The brain becomes less integrated. The **prefrontal cortex**, responsible for judgment, empathy, moral reasoning, and self-control, loses much of its coordinating influence while survival circuits begin dominating the conversation. Our thinking becomes increasingly narrow. Complexity gives way to black-and-white conclusions. Ambiguity becomes intolerable. We remember the offenses more vividly than the acts of kindness. We become increasingly convinced of our own interpretation while growing less curious about anyone else’s. In many ways, anger temporarily reorganizes the entire brain around one primary objective: **survival rather than relationship**.

The NeuroFaith® Perspective

This is where I believe the NeuroFaith® model adds something uniquely important. The brain never functions in isolation. Neither does the heart. God designed us as integrated beings in whom the brain, heart, autonomic nervous system, endocrine system, immune system, body, relationships, and spirit exist in constant conversation with one another. When one part of that system becomes dysregulated, the effects ripple throughout the entire person.

One of the most remarkable discoveries of modern neurocardiology is that the heart is engaged in continuous two-way communication with the brain. A healthy heart does not beat with mechanical precision. Instead, it displays a beautifully complex rhythm known as **healthy heart rate variability**. This flexibility reflects resilience within the autonomic nervous system and



supports emotional regulation, clearer thinking, sound judgment, and stronger executive functioning. During chronic anger, however, that rhythm becomes increasingly chaotic. As heart rate variability loses coherence, the signals traveling from the heart

to the brain become less orderly, and the brain itself becomes less integrated. The prefrontal cortex finds it increasingly difficult to coordinate the emotional brain, memory, reason, and bodily awareness into a coherent whole. The result is a mind that becomes progressively more reactive, rigid, and defensive.

Meanwhile, elevated cortisol continues circulating throughout the body. In the short term it serves us well. Over time, however, chronically elevated cortisol contributes to impaired immune regulation, chronic inflammation, disrupted sleep, elevated blood pressure, metabolic dysfunction, and memory difficulties. Even at the cellular level, the effects become apparent. Research suggests that persistent psychological stress, hostility, and unresolved anger are associated with shorter **telomeres**, the protective caps at the ends of our chromosomes that help preserve the integrity of our DNA. Although many factors influence aging, chronic stress appears capable of accelerating the biological wear and tear experienced by the body over time.

From a NeuroFaith® perspective, I find this profoundly meaningful. When Scripture repeatedly warns us not to remain in anger, I do not believe God is merely offering moral instruction. I believe He is protecting the remarkable bodies He created. Forgiveness, worship, gratitude, prayer, healthy movement, authentic relationships, and reconciliation where possible are not merely spiritual disciplines. They are biological interventions. They calm the autonomic nervous system. They improve communication between the heart and brain. They reduce excessive cortisol, promote healthier physiological regulation, and create the conditions in which healing can occur.

Perhaps that is why Paul wrote, “*Be angry and do not sin.*” Anger itself is not the enemy. It is a God-given signal that something important may require our attention. The danger arises when anger ceases to be a messenger and becomes a permanent resident. Once that happens, it begins reshaping not only our thoughts, but our bodies, our relationships, and ultimately our souls.

As I sat listening to Pastor Whitney this morning, I slowly realized something that was both convicting and strangely comforting. I wasn’t simply reviewing the neuroscience of anger. I was preparing to examine my own heart. And that, I suspect, is where the real journey begins.

Where Neuroscience Ends and Faith Begins

Now that we understand what anger does to the brain and body, we arrive at perhaps the most important question of all.

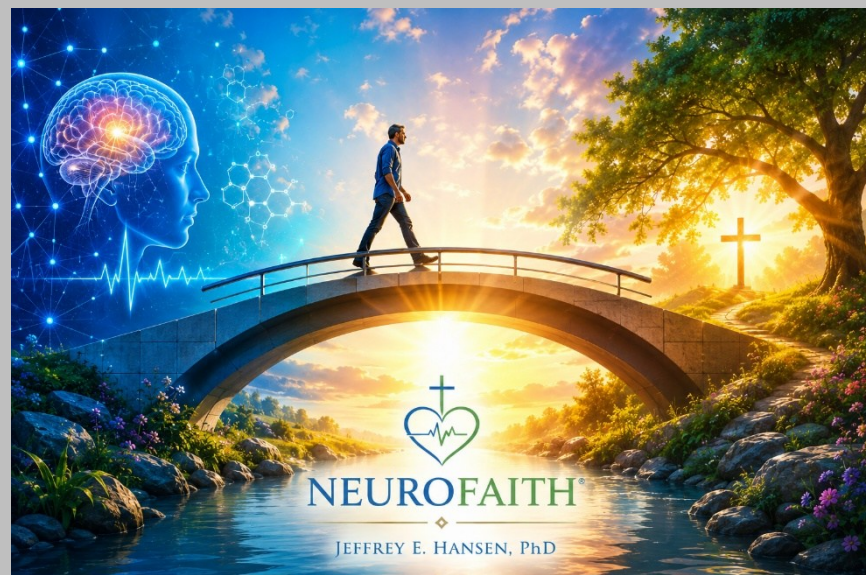
What do we do with it?

Neuroscience is remarkably good at describing the problem. It can show us what happens when the amygdala sounds the alarm, when adrenaline and cortisol flood the body, when dopamine quietly rewards our sense of righteous victory, and when the prefrontal cortex loses its ability to integrate wisdom, empathy, and restraint. It can even explain why chronic anger affects our heart, our immune system, our sleep, our relationships, and perhaps even the rate at which our cells age.

But neuroscience eventually reaches the limits of what it can explain. It can describe the biology of anger. It cannot restore the heart that anger has wounded. That is where faith enters the conversation.

From a NeuroFaith® perspective, I have never believed that

neuroscience and faith compete with one another. Rather, they answer different questions. Neuroscience explains how we become dysregulated. Faith shows us how God restores us.



Science helps us understand the mechanisms of anger. Scripture reveals what anger is ultimately trying to teach us about ourselves and about our relationship with God.

As I sat listening to Pastor Whitney that morning, I slowly realized I wasn't merely studying the neurobiology of anger.

I was beginning to recognize it within myself.

When David Forgot Who Was Really in Charge

Pastor Whitney then turned to one of the most powerful stories in Scripture, the account of **David, Nabal, and Abigail**. The prophet Samuel had recently died, and David had lost one of the great spiritual influences in his life. He was weary from years of living as a fugitive, exhausted from constantly looking over his shoulder, and undoubtedly carrying the emotional weight of disappointment, uncertainty, and loss. Then came Nabal.

David had protected Nabal's shepherds and flocks, asking for nothing more than simple kindness in return. Instead, Nabal responded with contempt. He publicly humiliated David, dismissed his generosity, and repaid faithfulness with arrogance. David's response was immediate. He strapped on his sword, gathered his men, and marched toward Nabal's household fully intending to wipe out every male in the family. It is a sobering reminder that even a man described by Scripture as "after God's own heart" could become so consumed by perceived injustice that revenge suddenly appeared not only reasonable, but righteous.

What strikes me most about this story is that David's greatest problem was not simply that he became angry. Anger, by itself, was understandable. He had genuinely been mistreated. His deeper problem was that anger quietly convinced him it had now become his responsibility to make everything right. Instead of waiting upon God's justice, David assumed responsibility for administering justice himself. His brain had become organized around survival rather than surrender. His nervous system shifted from trust to retaliation. Everything we have discussed about the neurobiology of anger had merged with something far more profound: a spiritual posture that subtly displaced God from His rightful place.

Then God sent Abigail.

Abigail did far more than calm David's emotions. She restored his perspective. She reminded him who he was, but even more importantly, she reminded him who God was. She gently interrupted the momentum of a nervous system already committed to battle and invited David to remember that justice had never been his burden to carry. Had David continued down that road, the

consequences would have followed him for the rest of his life. Instead, God, in His grace, placed someone in David's path who lovingly reminded him that vengeance belongs to the Lord.

As Pastor Whitney continued unpacking that story, I found the weight of his message settling more deeply upon me. I had already sensed, from the opening moments of the sermon, that God was speaking directly into my own life. But now the conviction was becoming far more personal. I was no longer simply admiring David's story. I found myself standing inside it.

My circumstances are obviously very different, but the condition of my heart was remarkably familiar. There has been an ongoing professional conflict in my own life involving someone, a former boss, I believe treated me unfairly and continues, in some respects, to misrepresent work that has meant a great deal to me. I wanted him to understand my perspective. I wanted him to acknowledge what I believed had been unfair. None of those desires were necessarily wrong. What became dangerous was my growing belief that somehow it depended upon me to make that happen. If I could simply explain things one more time, write one more email, make one more carefully reasoned argument, perhaps I could finally produce the justice I longed to see.

Then the Holy Spirit quietly asked me a question I could not escape.

"Jeff...who have you been trusting?"

The answer was uncomfortable.

If I was brutally honest with myself, I had begun living, just like King David, as though God either needed my help or might not be capable of handling the situation without me. I would never have admitted that consciously. In fact, I would have vigorously denied it. Yet our behavior often reveals what our hearts quietly believe. I had gradually become more confident in my own persistence than in God's sovereignty. In a very real sense, I had become the pastor of the Church of Jeff. I was relying on my own wisdom, my own arguments, and my own determination to accomplish something that ultimately belonged to God.



Pastor Whitney then made a statement that has stayed with me ever since. **Jesus was the only person who has ever lived who handled anger perfectly.** He never ignored injustice. He never minimized evil. He never failed to confront sin when it needed confronting. Yet His anger was always governed by perfect love, perfect wisdom, and complete trust in the Father. Mine is not. Left to myself, my anger inevitably becomes mixed with woundedness, fear, pride, and the desire to control outcomes that were never mine to control.

That, I believe, was the lesson God wanted me to hear that morning. The deepest antidote to anger is not merely learning to regulate my nervous system, important as that is. The deepest antidote is surrender. It is the quiet recognition that I am not the judge of the universe. I do not have to make every wrong right. I do not have to carry every injustice upon my shoulders. Faith ultimately invites me to release what I cannot control into the hands of the One who has never surrendered control for even a single moment.

Perhaps that is what Abigail restored in David that day.

And perhaps that is exactly what Pastor Whitney, through the grace of God, was restoring in me.

From Regulation to Restoration

As I reflected on all of this after church, another realization slowly began taking shape. Everything I had just been thinking about, the amygdala, cortisol, dopamine, heart rate variability, autonomic regulation, and the remarkable interplay between the brain and the body, is incredibly important. Modern neuroscience has given us extraordinary insight into how anger develops and why it can become so consuming. It has also provided us with practical tools that genuinely help. Learning to regulate our breathing, intentionally lengthening the exhale to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, practicing the Heart Lock-In® technique, cultivating gratitude and compassion, exercising, sleeping well, and intentionally restoring heart coherence are all valuable interventions. They calm the nervous system. They improve communication between the heart and the brain. They help move us from physiological chaos toward greater biological regulation.

But as helpful as those practices are, I found myself realizing that they are not, by themselves, enough. They help regulate the nervous system, but they do not necessarily transform the story the nervous system has been living from.

That distinction has become one of the central ideas within the NeuroFaith® model. Regulation is profoundly important, but regulation and restoration are not the same thing. Eventually we must ask why a particular event, a particular criticism, or a particular injustice touches us so deeply. Why did this situation provoke such a powerful reaction? Why did my nervous system become so

activated? Why did this particular wound seem to bypass my professional knowledge and strike somewhere much deeper?

I believe the answer often lies beneath our conscious thoughts, within those deeply rooted beliefs that become woven into the **Default Mode Network** over the course of a lifetime. Long before we have language to describe them, we begin developing conclusions about ourselves, about other people, and even about God. Experiences of rejection, shame, betrayal, disappointment, or trauma often become embedded within those beliefs until they no longer feel like beliefs at all. They simply feel true. When present-day events resemble those earlier experiences, our nervous system often reacts not only to what is happening today, but also to every similar wound it has carried before.

That is why I have become increasingly convinced that lasting healing requires more than learning to think differently. It requires learning to believe differently.

As I continued reflecting on Pastor Whitney's message, I realized that my struggle was never simply about another person. It was about what I was believing at that moment. I was acting as though the outcome depended upon me, as though it were my responsibility to make another person understand, to make another person acknowledge what I believed was true, to somehow produce justice through my own persistence. If I am brutally honest with myself, I had begun living as though God either needed my help or might not be capable of handling the situation without me. I would never have consciously said those words, but our behaviors often reveal what our hearts quietly believe.

The gospel gently confronts those beliefs, not with shame, but with truth.

Jesus reminds us that we are not powerless because His strength is made perfect in our weakness. He reminds us that we are not ultimately victims because our identity rests in His victory rather than in another person's approval or understanding. He reminds us that our worth is not determined by whether someone else finally sees our perspective. Most importantly, He reminds us that justice has never rested on my shoulders. It has always rested on His.

As those beliefs begin changing, something remarkable begins happening. **The nervous system no longer has to remain constantly on guard because the soul has found a safer place to rest.** The heart becomes more coherent because trust begins replacing fear. The brain becomes more integrated because survival is no longer directing every conversation. Forgiveness gradually becomes possible, not because injustice suddenly disappears, but because we no longer believe that we alone must make everything right.

The Neurobiology of Anger: *When the Old Psychologist Needed the Sermon*
-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

Perhaps that is the greatest lesson I carried home from church that morning. I arrived understanding the neuroscience of anger. I left being reminded that while neuroscience can teach me how to regulate my nervous system, only God can ultimately restore the deepest beliefs of my heart. He is still the One who heals, still the One who redeems, and still the One who invites weary people like me to lay down burdens we were never created to carry.

So, thank you, Pastor Whitney, for another sermon that somehow found its way directly into my life. Thank you for the imaginary nanoprobe in my brain and the invisible webcam in my office.

More importantly, thank you for faithfully preaching the kind of truth that makes an old psychologist squirm just enough to realize that perhaps the Holy Spirit is doing His finest work. I walked into church thinking I needed a better understanding of anger. I walked out remembering something far more important.

I never was supposed to carry it alone.

is exactly what Pastor Whitney, through the grace of God, began restoring in me.

