

My Faith Journey

Tony LoGrasso

Barah Ministries Homecoming Conference

9/28/13

Hello, Barah Ministries!

My name is Tony LoGrasso, representing the Lake Orion Michigan troop of the non-resident membership. Go Detroit Tigers! Let me just get that out of my system right now. And I'm over the my Lions' loss to the Cardinals a couple weeks back, so don't even go there.

I can't tell you how happy I am to finally be here! For a cancer survivor, being anywhere but the hospital is awesome. But being here is more than awesome, to finally meet and thank some of the many people in this congregation who prayed for me (what I like to call my Prayer Corps), who posted to my Caring Bridge, who sent me emails, who lifted my spirits, and my family's spirits. Because of that love I've received from this special group of people, this truly feels like a homecoming for me. And that's amazing considering I've never been here before, and up until now I've only personally met just a few of you (Pastor Rory of course, and Elliott and Jamie who came with Rory to visit me in the hospital).

I am grateful to Pastor Rory for finally kicking my butt to get over here. My wife Jennifer unfortunately could not make it because of parental duties back home with the weekend activities of our daughters Olivia and Noelle. But Jennifer sends her regrets, her love and her appreciation to Rory and Barah Ministries as well.

I'm also grateful to Rory for giving me opportunity to talk to you from his pulpit. I'm not very experienced in public speaking. But, (I think like some of you here) I first met Rory when the company I worked for hired him to put a bunch of us through his rigorous Focus Selling™ training. And if you've ever been through that, you've experienced his "Hot Seat". He knows if I can handle his "Hot Seat"

without tapping out, talking to this friendly crowd would be a cake walk. Plus he knows the Holy Spirit will be with me. The truth is, I jumped at this chance to talk to you. (He told me to fill 45 minutes, and to prepare about 10 pages for that. We'll I've got 13 pages here, so we'll see how that goes.)

I need to start by saying THANK YOU BARAH MINISTRIES! Thank you Pastor Rory for the Holy Spirit inspired lessons that have edified my soul these past couple challenging years of my life, when I've needed it most. Thank you June, for your inspired songs which complement the Pastor's lessons perfectly. Thank you, all of you, for your many prayers. And thanks to those of you who posted those uplifting messages to my CaringBridge.org website page. You have no idea how much strength and hope my wife and I have gained from those. From when Jennifer first created my page in January 2012, to the present, there have been 788 total guestbook postings. Can you believe 22% of those came from this church? Most of those were from you June! Rory, you came in second, but won hands-down on total word count. But's it's not a competition.

Pastor Rory asked me to talk to you about my faith in God, how that gift of faith helped me and my family through our cancer fighting journey, and how the experience has changed us for the better. I am happy to open up and share my story. I pray by doing so, in some small way it helps strengthen or plant the seed of faith in others, and to dispel their unbelief. We know from Mathew 17:20 that just a small speck of faith, like a mustard seed, is all we need to make a mountain move, or to make cancer go away.

Having been raised in a Catholic family, with a priest as an uncle to boot, I can't remember ever not believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. So God implanted a "mustard seed" of faith in me long before my story with cancer starts. But I think my experience with cancer has been the first real test of faith for me. Rory asked me to share instances of both unbelief and faith that I experienced.

There I was in September of 2011, blurring along in my busy life, working too many hours in my sales job at Curtiss-Wright, spending too little time with my wife and kids, too little time listening to my Lord, and frankly too little time just pausing to smell the roses of my so many blessings, though it didn't seem that way to me at the time. I thought it was a nuisance that I needed to get a routine physical just to avoid the \$100 per month penalty my company's health plan was going to charge me unless I provided a health screening form filled out by a doctor. I was too busy to really think much about it when Dr. Krebsbach, my primary care physician, said there was some abnormality with my red blood cell count, and so he needed me to go for a different blood test at a "specialty" clinic. I had recently also had a stomach flu bug, and Dr. Krebsbach said the test results may have been affected by that, but he wanted the specialty tests run to get a better diagnosis. So I just took down the time, date and address of the appointment he had made for me, and punched that into my Blackberry as if it were just another business meeting. I told Jennifer what the doctor told me, but I convinced her that there was nothing to worry about, because I felt great. So the notion that there could be anything wrong with me was inconceivable. And unbelievable.

There's that word: *unbelief*. So I need to pause and point out here the first instance of my unbelief in this story. It's a subtle one that I didn't actually realize until I sat down to write this. It's difficult to explain, but I'll try. I believe I possessed a blinding form of unbelief, a willing ignorance if you will, of signs that God was sending me, of circumstances God was putting me in for my own good (like my insurance penalty if I don't get a routine physical). I was failing to acknowledge of the existence of The Lord Jesus Christ's every-moment presence in my life, perhaps because of a delusion that I was the one in control. It was manifested in my habit of often being too hurried and impatient to be present in each blessed moment of my life, to "smell the roses" like I said earlier. Or to smell any scent, hear any sound, see any sight, or feel any emotion that the Lord was sending my way. It was an unhealthy and toxic way to be.

The special blood test was set for Friday, the 30th of September. Jennifer had plans to drive to Cleveland that afternoon for a long-overdue weekend visit with her good friend Jill. She asked me if she should delay her trip, but I insisted she go as planned, again assuring her there was nothing to worry about. I would be back home when the kids got out of school, so she should go enjoy herself!

So the stage was set. It wasn't until I arrived at the appointment and saw that the "specialty clinic" was actually an "Oncology and Hematology Center" that the reality of the situation first entered my thick skull: "Oh GOD, do I have CANCER?!" The test results were ready that very same day. My universe came to a screeching halt as I sat in the patient room listening to Dr. Dabak as she explained in a very unemotional business-like tone how the tests revealed the presence of a protein which is the tell-tale indicator of Multiple Myeloma, a rare cancer of the blood plasma residing in the bone marrow, for which there were treatments, but as yet no known absolute cure. Or so she told me. "I am very sorry", Dr. Dabak said in a slightly more sensitive tone that I can remember very clearly. To determine the stage of my cancer she then immediately put me through a set of full body x-rays, since Multiple Myeloma deteriorates your bones in it's more advanced stages. I kept up a positive upbeat veneer with the x-ray techs, but I remember clearly it was while I was laying on that x-ray table in a that dark room that I first broke down into tears.

On my drive home, I decided I needed to muster the strength to keep up the veneer for a few more days. I was not going to ruin Jennifer's weekend with this catastrophic news. I knew it was likely to be her last weekend get-away for a long time. I would tell her when she got back home Sunday night. And because I did not want to tell another soul until I told her, I had to keep the emotion bottled up all weekend with the kids. Those were two of the longest days of my life. The only friends I could cry to privately until Jennifer returned were my God and my Weimariner Blitz. I hugged him an awful lot that weekend. And I prayed. The worst thing I did was to search the internet to learn more about Multiple Myeloma. "Incurable." "3 to 5 year life expectancy." These were some of the first things I remember seeing that stick in my head.

I remember taking my kids to a local carnival on Saturday, outwardly trying to be cheerful, inwardly a wreck. I'm going to die a horrible, slow death! I'll never see my girls graduate! I'll never walk them down the marriage aisle! I'll never hold my grandchildren! I'll leave my poor wife to raise this family on her own, without enough income. These were the sad anxieties racing through my head. In other words, I was encountering more *unbelief*! In his recent lesson, Pastor Rory talked about how unbelief destroys hope. Well, I was letting it destroy mine. I certainly wasn't thinking about MAR 9:23, when Jesus said "*...all things are possible to him who believes.*", nor was I praying like the epileptic boy's father in MAR 9:24 when he said "*I do believe; help my unbelief.*"

The kids were in bed Sunday night when Jennifer got home. I hugged her as if she'd been gone for years. I asked her how her weekend went, but she immediately sensed in me something was wrong. I said, "we need to talk", took her hand and led her to sit with me on the sofa. She later said her immediate fear was that I was going to ask for a divorce. When I told her about the diagnosis, of course she felt terrible for not being there for me. She would have cancelled her plans and turned around immediately if I had called her, and she was not accepting my rationale for waiting until Sunday to tell her.

It was an enormous weight off my shoulders to finally confide in her. Like any marriage, our relationship has had its rough patches. But I don't think I've ever been more grateful for her in my life than at that time. We both cried an awful lot that night. I need to say here, though I can tell you all about the emotions I experienced throughout this entire ordeal, I cannot relate to you all the emotions she experienced. But I can tell you how she acted. Immediately, she became my rock of strength. Without hesitation, from when I first told her, and throughout the entire ordeal, she lovingly moved into the role of my caregiver, my counselor, my psychiatrist, my medical researcher, and my prayer partner. You name it, she was there for me from when I first told her that Sunday night, and through the entire experience. She was also there for our kids to help them cope. Never once through this whole ordeal did she freak out. If she did, she did it privately, never in front of me or the kids.

This is one of the instances of faith-building I want to point out. Many relationships don't stand up to in the face of tribulations such as cancer. I have a friend who's marriage in fact ended while he was being treated for cancer. I am so very blessed to be able to say cancer may have actually made the relationship between Jennifer and I even stronger than before. How did Jesus provide his unconditional love to me in my time of need? One big way was to arrange in eternity past that I would marry a woman who would give me her unconditional love during my time of need. Discovering that our relationship was actually strengthened by this test has been a major faith building experience for me.

Our first order of business was to figure out what and how to tell our kids, who at that time were just 11 and 8 years old. We decided to sit them down in the morning, and tell them we had a serious matter to discuss, kind of like how I told Jennifer. Wouldn't you know it, the first thing they wanted to know is if mommy and daddy were getting a divorce! We explained that I have cancer, told them what we know about Multiple Myeloma (having educated ourselves a lot more about it, and how it's treated), and that I might get very sick with the treatment, but that everything would be okay. God would take care of us. There were a lot of tears and hugs, and we decided it would be best if we let them stay home from school that day. They needed time to deal with their thoughts and emotions, and to ask questions about mortality.

The next few days were difficult ones: telling our family, my employer, our closest friends, including Pastor Rory. I believe it was early October when Pastor first asked the Barah Ministries congregation to pray this friend of his in Detroit, whom you've never met. As the news spread, it didn't take long for my Prayer Corps to form and begin deploying powerful appeals to the Throne of Grace on my behalf.

On the medical front in those early days, there more doctor visits and tests including my first bone marrow biopsy. (To date I've gotten four!) Dr. Dabak determined that I was fortunately at a very early stage (between stages 1 and 2 she said), with no bone deterioration. But I was forbidden from lifting anything greater than 10 lbs.

Just days before Thanksgiving 2011 I flew to Houston to seek a second opinion from MD Anderson, one of the premier cancer centers in the world, where I was able to quickly get an appointment with the help of a friend. Help from friends is an often recurring theme in my story. MD Anderson confirmed Dr. Dabak's diagnosis, and concurred with her recommended two phase course of action. Phase one was to undergo three to six of a trio of drugs proven to control Multiple Myeloma in many patients (including two chemo therapy drugs: Revlimid (a pill), and Velcade (an IV drug, as well as a steroid: Decadron). Those drugs were known to have relatively very mild side effects. For instance, they would not induce hair loss (which was the least of my worries anyway, because as Rory can tell you, there wasn't much up there to lose anyway). More importantly to my still very career-focused way of thinking, the side effects were mild enough where I could continue to largely live a normal life and continue working, with the only restriction being that I would have to curtail travel because of my need to visit the clinic twice a week for my IV drug.

The objective of phase 1 was to drive the disease into remission. But it would not be a lasting remission because Multiple Myeloma eventually will come back without more drastic measures. Hence the need for phase 2: the stem cell transplant. This would involve heavy duty chemo therapy that would hospitalize me for several weeks, and was designed to kill the myeloma and the rest of my bone marrow. It could kill me too, if the stem cells fail to engraft to help rebuild my marrow. (The stem cells could be from myself or from a donor that was a close enough genetic match. More on that phase later.)

The doctors had laid out their plan. Phase one had been approved by my health insurance company. Now the decision was up to me to actually agree to the treatment. But part of me feared that by jumping in I would be stepping into some point of no return. There were rare but potentially life threatening side effects from the drugs, like risks of inducing secondary cancers. Jennifer and I had also been doing a lot of research into the cancer fighting benefits of organic diets, and holistic remedies. We had read there is a school of thought which says the cancer industry seeks to discredit any news about the success of non-traditional therapies for fear that it would disrupt their cash stream.

This doubt and unbelief had to be overcome by faith. Ultimately I decided it was time to take a leap of faith: faith that God brought me to my doctors for a reason; faith that the doctors were presenting me with the course of action I was meant to take; and faith that it would be successful.

Phase one chemo therapy treatments began on January 13th. It was about this time that Jennifer convinced me to allow her to begin chronicling my fight with cancer on the CaringBridge.org website. I have to admit that initially I had some big reservations about the idea of advertising to the world that I'm a cancer patient. Dealing with cancer is an intensely personal matter, and understandably I think most cancer victims tend to want to deal with it as privately as possible. But again I put my trust in the Lord, and in Jennifer's ability to tell the story well. And this is a leap of faith that I am so glad I took. Jennifer's updates were so well done that friends and family would call her clamoring for their weekly update if she was ever late in publishing one. It helped spread the word to an ever widening fabric of friends, and friends of friends whom I've never met, but who signed my guestbook just to let know they were praying for me. The many guestbook postings filled me with cheer and humor at times when I really needed it.

I want to share with you here the first of Pastor Rory's many awesome posts, this one dated 2/11/12:

Tony:

Here is God's sense of humor. Maybe I am not just your Pastor. Maybe I am also your bone marrow donor. That's how God's sense of humor works. If I am your donor, you would become cool on a whole new level. Ya feeling me ? :) Swab me.

I hope this note finds you, and Jennifer, and Olivia and Noelle doing well. I am a fan of adversity like this. People are amazing during times of adversity. Why are we always crying for prosperity and retirement and a lottery win when our best comes out during times like this?

It's amazing to watch your strength at this time. Maybe your body is ravaged by cancer, and maybe your sleep is disrupted, and maybe you're eating roots and berries like Yogi Bear, but nothing has stolen your sense of humor, your love of the Lord, your lovely family, or your work ethic.

I have the Christmas picture of your family on my desk. In times of adversity, often families pull apart. I see yours huddling together, moving closer, closing ranks, and weathering the storm. I feel confident that you will all come out the other side as people better able to endure because of it.

JAM 1:2 -4

Consider (i.e. come to the conclusion) it (is) all (for the purpose of) joy (absolute happiness), my brethren (believers in Christ), when you encounter various trials (pressure),//knowing (through experience) that the testing of your faith (your trust in God and your belief in His Word) produces endurance.//And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect (mature) and complete (undamaged), lacking (being deficient) in nothing.

God gives us situations like this to make us happy. We are happiest when we know we can endure anything, when we are not afraid because we are upheld by Him, when we see those around us who are really on our side. Adversity reveals this.

Press on. And KNOW this...you are delivered. It happened in eternity past and it will be revealed to you in the coming days. God has already assured your victory. It is sealed. Let there be no doubt in your mind. Press on.

Pastor Rory Clark

The chronical of wonderful messages like this, and the story told by Jennifer's updates, give us a permanent record of this amazing journey that we will always cherish.

Well, after six months of taking the phase one medicine, the results were not as favorable as we had hoped. A bone marrow biopsy revealed the reduction in Myeloma numbers was only partial, but not complete remission. This meant that for phase 2, doing a stem cell transplant with my own cells would be pointless, since we would only be putting cells with Myeloma back into my body. A transplant of cells donor would be more effective. But this is where things got really complicated, and where our Lord truly came through for me. First, my insurance company threw me for a loop, by letting me know that the hospital I had been dealing with for my treatments to-date, Henry Ford Health Systems, what not considered “in the network” for doing stem cell transplants, and would cost me about 3 times more out of pocket (about \$10K) than the only in-network hospital in my area, Karmanos Cancer Center. I had grown to really like and trust the medical team I was dealing with at Henry Ford, so I considered this an outrageous inconvenience. Well this proved to be another example of unbelief on my part. What was actually playing out here was God’s hand in moving me to the team at Karmanos that would ultimately execute the treatment that is allowing me to stand here today and talk to you, free of cancer. It turns out Karmanos does about three times more stem cell transplants per year than Henry Ford. And the doctor I talked to there, Dr. Al-Kadhimi, was the first one to tell me and Jennifer that it may actually be possible to permanently cure the disease. Up to that point the best we were told we could expect was maybe a five to seven year remission, then it would come back and the transplant process would need to be repeated. The older a patient gets, the more life threatening the transplant process becomes. Dr. Al-Kadhimi explained that there have been cases however, of patients who have received donor transplants and have been in remission for about 15 years and counting, since the clinical data just does not yet go beyond that amount of time.

I was quick to agree to his plan of treatment. But two more hurdles had to be cleared: 1) the insurance company had to approve the transplant. 2) we had to find a suitable donor. The insurance company hurdle proved to be only a minor delay of maybe two weeks before full coverage was approved. It was the donor search that more than anything proved to us that God truly has my back. There a

25% chance that a sibling will be a close enough genetic stem cell match, and I have three siblings, two brothers and a sister. Testing revealed my sister Maryann to be a perfect 10 out of 10 genetic parameter match. I'll never forget the moment when my sister called me in tears of happiness after Karmanos notified her. It was May 30, 2012, the day before my birthday, and the sweetest gift I've ever received. I was with a colleague about to go visit a customer, and I broke down in tears as well. For me this moment was the ultimate faith builder, the proof this doubting Thomas needed that I was going to be delivered by the hand of God, and that He will answer all those prayers. It was the ultimate bunker-buster of my remaining unbelief.

Many of my anxieties about entering the transplant process subsided. My fears about beginning my lengthy medical leave from work slipped away, and I stopped taking Xanax for anxiety. My fear was that my company would not stand by me as I entered this dark tunnel that would hospitalize me for seven weeks, and would keep me home-bound to recover for another five months. But I let faith take over, that even if that were to happen, it would only be because God has even better planned for me. As it turned out, the people I worked for at Curtiss-Wright stood by me every step of the way, and continue to be there for me even today, and I have fully shifted back into the hectic work pace that I wasn't sure I would ever be able to juggle again. I'm not sure yet if that is a good thing. But I know I'm not as work-centered as I used to be. And it's more of a priority for me now to enjoy and be present in the time I spend with my family.

JOH 1:16 says *"For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace."*

Here are other examples of how God has thoroughly graced me and my family out through this journey:

- Last August, while I was in the hospital, my siblings with lots of help from other relatives and friends, organized a hugely successful golf outing fund raiser for me. Friends who I had not spoken to ten years showed up for that. It raised enough funds to keep us whole after all the medical co-pays and loss of income from when I was getting fractional long-term disability pay.

- While I was in the hospital, my mother-in-law Ginger left her home in NC to take care of our kids for a month, allowing Jennifer to be with me during my most difficult times there.
- And so many friends and family pitched in to provide meals, take our kids places, do our yard chores, like closing our pool.

Jennifer and I both were reluctant at first to accept all this help, but ultimately we opened ourselves up to all the grace, and became deeply humbled and frankly awe struck at the width and the depth of the support fabric God has placed in our lives.

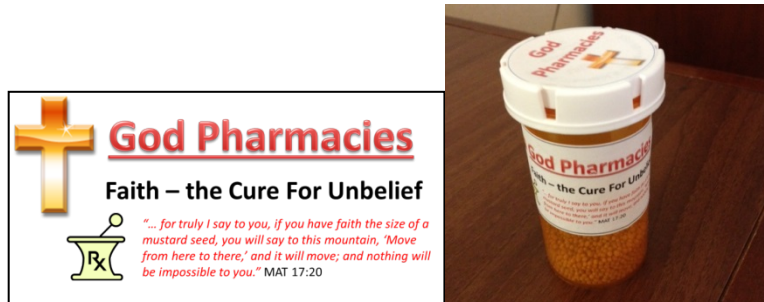
My children have handled it beautifully. It made them cope with some harsh realities of their parents' mortality, which as parents we can't help but want to protect them from. But ultimately I believe it strengthened them and made them more mature. And it has absolutely strengthened the LoGrasso family unit, and brought us all closer to Jesus Christ.

The cancer has been in remission probably since about February or March, when the numbers in my blood test first went to zero. My fourth bone marrow biopsy, which was done in August, about a year after my stem cell transplant date, confirmed remission. In retrospect, I can truly Count it All Joy (and I've already put in my request to June to sing that song!) My journey has been a time of renewing for me spiritually.

I find it interesting and maybe not coincidental that it has also been a time of renewing for the doctrinal direction of Barah Ministries. It's as if God is preparing us all for something more important. I can tell you that the messages from this pulpit have never been more clear and pure. The simple truth that faith is the antidote for unbelief is such a powerful message.

To help reinforce that message, Rory invited me to talk to you about my faith journey. I hope this has increased your faith even just a little. Because that's all it takes.

I'll leave you with this. I actually tried to keep track of this, and to my knowledge, I believe I've taken about 37 different kinds of medications throughout my fight with cancer. Now that's a lot, and I believe that makes me a bit more of an authority on medication than most people. So I can tell you with confidence that the only medicine you'll ever really need is from God Pharmacies. It's called **Faith – the Cure for Unbelief.**



I'd like to close with a prayer of thanks:

Heavenly Father

I thank you for bringing me here to speak from the pulpit of my dear friend Rory, to my fellow believers here at Barah Ministries.

Thank you for the blessing of my adversities with cancer.

May it serve as a billboard to other advertising the power of having even a small amount of faith.

Help us gain the fruit of strengthened faith from our fellowship with one another here this weekend, so that we may go out from here and find ways to share that faith with others.

We ask this through the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen

Thank you.