

Are we there yet? Romans 5:1-8

I want to go from suffering to hope as quickly as possible.

by [Felipe N. Martinez](#) in the [May 31, 2005](#) issue

When I take a long road trip, the route I choose depends on whether I am driving my car or riding my motorcycle. If I have a tight time line, I drive my car. I prefer to travel on interstate highways if possible. My priority is to get to my destination quickly; I map out a route, set the cruise control, turn on the radio, fly through the countryside and stop only when absolutely necessary.

But if the weather is right and time is no factor, my priorities change. I grab my helmet and am off on my motorcycle. I avoid the interstate at all costs, mostly because I find Midwest interstates mind-numbingly boring to travel on a bike. I ride on back roads and state routes, take in the scenery and sometimes stop in a town even if I don't need to refuel. These are two very different ways to get from point A to point B.

When I read Romans 5:1-8, I want to go from suffering to hope as quickly as possible. The words fly by me like scenery zooming past on the interstate: "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing-that-suffering-produces-endurance-and-endurance-produces-character-and-character-produces-hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (my hyphens). I try to slow down but I can't. The end is what I like about the passage. I am impatient, focused on reaching that hopeful part. My brain asks, like a child's voice: "Are we there yet?"

The mention of hope and love draws me. I feel called to share a message that gives people hope. Yet as powerful as it is to preach about God's presence and enduring love, about looking forward in the midst of suffering, believers will hear this message differently depending on how quickly they are living through the succession of steps on their way to hope. Some believers could be just starting out on the suffering-to-hope journey. They may be experiencing suffering as just that: suffering. For them

suffering is producing anger, sadness and pain well ahead of any promised endurance their experience might bring. Paul's route for this trip may be clearly mapped out, but for some it's not a trip on a straight interstate highway at 65 miles an hour. Instead it feels more like a dizzying drive on a road with steep climbs, narrow bridge crossings and warning signs. On this winding road, the journey takes on a new dimension. Those words—suffering, endurance, character, hope—are like signs for small towns you ride through on a motorcycle. They are not the backdrop for the trip, but part of the experience. Paul seems to have traveled this road. He knows the curves and uphill climbs, and he knows the little towns along the road. He has lived in each of them—in some for short periods of time, in others longer than he had anticipated.

We meet people everyday who live in these towns. They move from one town to the next, and perhaps back again, depending on what life throws their way. If I am to preach a message of hope that will be heard and believed, I must make it clear that I have taken the back roads and come to know the townsfolk in Suffering on a first-name basis, have stayed in Endurance, and have relatives who live in Character and Hope. Somehow all these places have been part of my life's journey. If I try to speak about these little towns while keeping a safe distance, those people not currently living in Hope may wonder if I really understand what it takes to traverse their winding roads.

A couple of years after I accepted my first position as minister, serving as pastor of a church in St. Anne, Illinois, my parents came from Mexico for a visit. During their stay my father, who had recently turned 80, suffered a minor stroke that paralyzed the left side of his body. We took him to a local hospital, where he stayed for a week. My mother refused to leave his bedside, and the intensive care unit made arrangements so she could stay with him. The week is a blur in my mind, but I know that every day I went to the hospital to support Mom and Dad. He was able to regain a good deal of his prestroke mobility by the time he was released from the hospital but was still too weak to travel back home. That Sunday, as I led the congregation in the first hymn, I looked up and saw my family making a late entrance. Dad walked slowly down the sanctuary's center aisle, assisted by my wife on one side and my mom on the other.

Seeing Dad looking so frail brought up all the emotions that had been bottled up through the week, and my tears flowed so freely that I could not continue singing. My ministry at that church, which lasted ten years, hit a pivotal moment that

Sunday. When the members of the congregation saw me in pain, they ministered to me—not from a distance, but as fellow travelers on the same patch of winding road. They comforted me, and through their actions they taught me how to give direction to a lost traveler looking for a town called Hope.