

A letter to Timothy

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [May 9, 2001](#) issue

Dear Timothy, As I was preparing a brief meditation on the “last words” of Jesus, I thought of you. The rector of my church asked me to speak about the “second word”: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” If you know your Bible you will remember that Jesus said this to one of the criminals who was crucified with him. You will be executed on May 16. So I wondered what Jesus would have said to you.

Astonishing, isn’t it, this “word” of Jesus? After all, the one to whom he said this had apparently committed a crime that deserved the most severe punishment available, crucifixion. At least that is what the poor man thought: “We are getting what our deeds deserve,” he rebuked his fellow criminal as the latter mocked Jesus. What is astonishing is that Jesus did not respond, “Well, I know that hanging on the cross is not pleasant, but that’s how it should be: evil deeds should catch up with the doer.” Instead, Jesus promised the man paradise, not in a distant future but “today,” and this for nothing more than a request that Jesus remember him when he, Jesus, came into his kingdom. The innocent end up in paradise: that’s what we would expect. But that proven criminals go there too? That’s surprising—at least for those who judge only by appearances and deeds.

Some people are deeply troubled by the idea that Jesus would fling the gates of paradise so wide open. What kind of paradise could it be in which criminals live and flourish together with their victims? The newspapers on this past Good Friday—the day I was to speak at my church—reported that the U.S. attorney general granted permission to the relatives of your victims to watch your execution. They will not have a sense of closure, some said, until they see you, the killer of their loved ones, dead. For them, closure requires that the scales of justice be balanced, and that in turn demands a punishment commensurate with the crime. I understand their feelings; many people who have been violated feel the same.

Yet Jesus spoke of a different “closure.” On the cross, Jesus provided an alternative to punishment. It is called grace. By grace, self-confessed criminals, not just good people, belong in paradise.

I know the victims will object: “Then hasn’t Jesus simply thrown justice out the window?” The answer is no. After all, the criminal himself stated that he deserved punishment. He affirmed the claims of justice, even if he had transgressed against them. It is important that you do the same. According to the papers you are not remorseful. I take this to mean that you don’t think what you did was wrong.

I hope that you will not remain defiant in your last hour. You will be permitted to make a brief final statement before the lethal chemicals are administered. The relatives of the victims will be watching you. Tell them that what you did was wrong, that you are sorry for the pain you caused them. Above all, tell God that you have wronged him by violating the crown of his creation. Recognition of our wrongdoing is partly how we receive from God more, much more, than we deserve—entrance into a world of love. And who knows? By such recognition, you may help “redeem” those who find it hard to live without seeing you die. For buried beneath the rubble of our sinful lust for vengeance is the desire for the closure of reconciliation, not of punishment; the closure of transformed life, not of death.

The executioners of the federal government will do their job—you will be put to death whether or not you admit your guilt, seek forgiveness from God and your victims, and manifest a changed life. I think the government is making a big mistake. I don’t mean that government’s punishment is in principle incompatible with Christ’s forgiveness. I mean that capital punishment is wrong—not as wrong as the killing of innocent people, but a serious wrong nonetheless. Yet we cannot do much about that at this point, certainly not before May 16. Soon you will face the dark hour of your death. If you believe and listen intently, there you will hear Jesus tell you, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” But Jesus offers you more than a paradisaal future. The other side of the promise “You will be with me in paradise” is his assurance “I am now with you in your hell.”

If you have any churchgoing in your background, you may remember that the Bible and the Apostles’ Creed speak of Jesus “descending into hell.” Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, thought that Jesus’ descent into hell did not happen after Jesus died, but as he was hanging on the cross. The cross was his hell—the hell of excruciating pain, the hell of deep disappointment, the hell of abandonment by God and friends, the hell of dark despair, the hell of taking upon himself the sins of the world—my sins and yours. The Son of God entered our hell, and he promises to lead us into paradise. Again, if you listen, this is what you will hear Jesus tell you in your last hour: “You are about to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I have

already been where you are now about to go. I know your pain and your dread and I want to carry away the burden of your guilt. . . . Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Timothy, we have never met, and we are not likely to meet in this life. But I will look for you in paradise.