

The Meaning of *TOPOS* in Eph 4:27

Don't give the Devil a *Place*? Or, Don't give the Devil an *Opportunity*?

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According to much of contemporary 'spiritual warfare' teaching, the word *topos* means "place" in Eph 4:27 and refers literally to an inhabitable space: and not just that but to an *internally* inhabitable place or space. On this interpretation, what Paul is warning against is unexpectedly shocking and drastic: ***If you remain angry after sundown Satan can enter you and inhabit you*** (either in person or through the secondary agency of his demons). This would be a remarkable teaching indeed, not least since there is nothing in context that leads us to expect it and nothing in context that deals with what to do if such a horrendous thing should happen. There is, for example, no reference to the deliverance of the believer, to the binding/rebuking of Satan and demons, etc.

Thankfully, there is no need to interpret the word *topos* in such a woodenly literal and internal manner. Like so many other words, the word *topos* has a metaphorical meaning that is more agreeable to the context and to the teaching of the NT as a whole.

- According to the standard Greek lexicon, Bauer's *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, the word *topos* may mean "possibility, opportunity, chance" and, in fact, has this meaning in Eph 4:27. As they translate the verse, it means "do not give the devil a chance to exert his influence" (p. 823).
- The standard theological dictionary, Kittel's 10 volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, agrees with this in several places: "give the devil no play, no possibility of working" (2:81). Elsewhere this dictionary says that "As in general Greek usage, so in the NT the transferred sense of 'opportunity'" can be found. It then lists Eph 4:27 as one of multiple NT examples of this general usage (8:205). Cf., e.g., Acts 25:16; Heb 8:7.
- In Wuest's *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, 1:114, he states that "[*topos*] is used in the sense of 'opportunity, power, occasion for acting.'"
- Rogers & Rogers in their *New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*, p. 442, state that *topos* is used "here in the sense of place in your life or opportunity."
- Vine's classic *Expository Dictionary*, s.v., "place" notes that *topos* can be used "metaphorically of condition, occasion, opportunity" and cites Eph 4:27 as an example.
- Thayer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* similarly notes that *topos* can be used to mean "opportunity, power, occasion for acting" and lists Eph 4:27 as an example.
- According to linguists Bratcher and Nida, in their highly respected *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, p. 117, what Paul is saying is: "do not give the devil a chance," meaning, "to tempt you." This series is widely used and is the standard United Bible Societies tool for translating the Greek NT into other languages.

- With this the best Greek-based NT commentaries agree. According to Alford's *Greek Testament*, 3:125, Paul is exhorting the Ephesians to not "give scope" or "opportunity of action" to the devil by remaining in a state of anger.
- F.F. Bruce in *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, in the New International Commentary on the New Testament, translates Eph 4:27 as "give no opportunity to the devil" (p. 359). To this he adds that "the prime promoter of such discord is the devil" (p. 361). That is, the devil promotes and takes advantage of discord among brothers in the Christian community.
- According to A.T. Lincoln in the Word Biblical Commentary on *Ephesians*, pp. 302-303, Paul in Eph 4:27 says "do not give an opportunity to the devil" ... lest he "exploit the situation."
- Similarly, M. Barth in the 2 vol. Anchor Bible Commentary on *Ephesians*, 2:514, notes that "the Greek noun *topos* ('place') is used in a metaphorical sense, i.e., for denoting ... an opportunity." Later he adds, 2:546-547, that the context is corporate, speaking of the church body as a whole, and thus what Paul is saying is "you must not give him 'opportunity' to use you for your own and your neighbor's destruction."
- According to P. T. O'Brien in the Pillar Commentary on *Ephesians*, pp. 341-342, Paul is simply saying that Christians should not give the devil a "chance" to exploit discord in the community. O'Brien specifically adds in a footnote that Paul is not in context speaking of the entry of a demon into an individual Christian (n. 289)!
- The monumental commentary by H. W. Hoehner on *Ephesians*, pp. 622-623, also agrees with this interpretation: "The noun *topos* literally means 'place' but can be rendered 'possibility, opportunity, chance' (cf. Acts 25:16). 'Opportunity' gives the best sense in this text." He then adds, "Paul does not want believers to give the devil an opportunity by their anger. ... the devil is a slanderer who wants to see divisiveness in the body, which is caused by festering anger." By "settling issues quickly" we "thwart the devil who will attempt to manipulate the situation for his purposes. In this passage the devil does not cause the anger but simply would like to use it as an opportunity to work evil."
- Similar is the definitive Greek grammar book *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* by Daniel B. Wallace. In it he states the meaning of Eph 4:27 as: "one should not give a place to the devil *by doing nothing about the sin in the midst of the believing community*." In this he agrees with his earlier 1989 article on this passage in the *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (1989): p. 365, where he argues that the passage is dealing with church discipline and that Eph 4:27 thus means: "don't let the devil gain a foothold in the assembly by letting sin go unchecked." Paul categorically does *not* have the Satanic inhabitation of the individual believer in view but rather the influence of Satan in the believing community.
- And, finally, a major recent scholarly examination of the biblical teaching on Satan and demons concurs with the above assessment. According to Sydney H. T. Page, *Powers of*

Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan & Demons (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), pp. 188-189, “If we ask for a specific example of how Satan attacks believers, we need look no farther than Ephesians 4:26-27 These two verses ... warn that Satan can exploit the strains that develop within the Christian community ... anger can provide the devil with an opportunity to wreak havoc in the life of the individual and the community. This can, however, be avoided if anger is managed properly.” And later he states, p. 247, that “temptation to sin is certainly one of the ways the devil attacks believers (cf. Eph. 4:26-27).” In this view Page agrees fully with the similar earlier work of Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, pp. 20-21, who renders the verse in question (p. 20) as “give no opportunity to the devil.”

The danger in taking the word *topos* literally, ***and not just literally but internally*** (such that by being angry after sundown we allow Satan and demons to enter into us), is that it reads something into the context that is not there and cuts against the grain of many statements in the NT to the effect that while the Tempter (Matt 4:3) and his demons can ***tempt*** us, and while the Father of Lies and his minions may try to ***deceive*** us, they cannot actually indwell or inhabit us, much less possess or own us. Taking this verse literally/internally seems to undermine the finished work of Christ and the undeniably internal (indwelling) presence of God the Holy Spirit in the temples of our bodies. Perhaps some caution is in order, then, before too hastily taking the word as it is so often taken in much of contemporary ‘spiritual warfare’ teaching. The word should be interpreted in context and in the way that best fits the rest of the NT’s teaching on the role of Satan and the security of the believer in Christ. With this the best Greek tools and commentaries agree.