THE DIVINE COVENANT’S DISCIPLINARY PROTOCOL

A major component of the divine covenant is often misunderstood—the covenant blessings for faithfulness to the covenant (Lev. 26:1–13) and the curses for unfaithfulness (Lev. 26:14–45; see also Deut. 28:1–68). The curses for unfaithfulness to the covenant were not the threatenings of a power-hungry, angry God, but rather the warnings of a loving Parent provided to children prone to self-destructive ways. They describe the natural consequences of life without divine protection that unfaithfulness forfeits, and the promise of a carefully managed disciplinary protocol of divine interventions to save them from utter self-destruction (cf. Deut. 8:5).

The first New Testament occurrence of paideia, “discipline,” implies that if fathers “discipline” as God does, it will not “provoke . . . children to anger” (Eph. 6:4, NASB). The second and only other New Testament use of paideia outside of Hebrews 12:5–11 is 2 Tim. 3:16. In this text, the divine, covenantal disciplinary protocol is outlined: (1) it starts with “teaching” concerning the right way; (2) if this teaching is ignored, “reproof” becomes necessary to gently but firmly guide back to safe paths; (3) if the reproof is disregarded, then “correction,” often painful and initially unwelcome, is provided as a more intense warning of even more severe trouble ahead if the present course of disobedience is pursued; and finally, (4) assuming the previous combination of steps in the disciplinary protocol were successful, the recipient has been or can now be “trained” (paideia), fully disciplined, to become “thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17).
Write out Hebrews 12:1–17 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Hebrews 12:5–11. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
God did not create humanity to experience covenant curses, only covenant blessings. Adam’s sinful choice made covenant curses a necessity.

Are the covenant curses the natural consequences of sin, or are they imposed by God? The answer is complicated by the fact that the Bible often describes things God allowed as things He caused (Job 1:12; 2:3–6; 42:11; 2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Chron. 21:1). This debate will never be fully solved until the millennium and need not concern us here. The divine covenant contained and contains blessings and curses. Our concern here is to ponder what the covenant curses mean.

Baptism is the New Testament symbol of an inward conversion and a rite of passage into the new covenant. At baptism we enter a new union with Christ and a new relationship with His kingdom as His spiritual sons and daughters (Rom. 6:3, 4; John 3:3–5). Baptized believers, as the sons and daughters of God, have granted to Him, and He appears to have taken on, an enhanced parental role on their behalf for their spiritual protection and development: “The LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” (Prov. 3:12, NIV). “Those whom the LORD loves He disciplines” “... for our good, so that we may share His holiness” (Heb. 12:6, 10, NASB). This was and is the continuing role of the covenant curses. They are designed to protect us from any further ravages of sin and to secure us to God’s heart by ties that cannot be broken (Lev. 26:40–45).

Our spiritual forbears viewed and related to the covenant curses as blessings. “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word” (Ps. 119:67, NKJV). “It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes” (Ps. 119:71, NKJV). David prayed for whatever it would take for God to wake him up when he went astray: “Search me, O God, and know my heart. . . . See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23, 24).

The point of the covenant curses is to lead the unconverted to conversion and to reclaim the converted who have strayed (see Jer. 18:7–10). His “curses” are perfectly calculated to be sufficiently intense, but no more so than absolutely necessary, to accomplish their redemptive purpose (Isa. 28:23–29)! “A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish” (Isa. 42:3, NASB). “He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men” (Lam. 3:33, NKJV).

Think of the “correcting” hardships and sufferings that remind us that we have strayed from the path of the teachings of God’s Word, and think of the convicting voice of the Holy Spirit in our own conscience, as evidences of Jesus’ enduring, covenantal love for us. He does not want us to suffer the intensifying hardships of sin or to lose eternal life without as many corrective warnings and hardships, or “curses,” if you please, as needed to alert us to the devastating and potentially fatal dangers involved and to encourage us to renew our relationship with Him. Some of us have to run many such “red lights” and get into a few “accidents” in the process before we heed the warnings and turn back. Some never do. But Jesus’ covenantal commitment is that if we fall away completely, to eternal destruction, it will not be because we did not have sufficient warnings to turn back. He will never force anyone to convert or to repent, but He loves you intensely and has committed Himself to Your salvation to the extent that He will leave no stone unturned to secure you to Him. And if, in the final analysis, you persist in the way that leads to eternal destruction, it will be over His dead body! Thank God for His covenant “curses”; they are among our greatest blessings!
DISCIPLINE TO TRAIN AND EQUIP

Our inclusion in the divine covenant does not merely assure us of God's disciplinary interventions to protect us from falling away but also assures us of His commitment to “training [paideia, disciplining] [us] in righteousness, so that [we] may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16, 17, NIV) to produce “a harvest of righteousness and peace” (Heb. 12:11, NIV).

When Adam fell, the covenant of “grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began” (2 Tim 1:9, NKJV) was activated on earth as the divine plan of salvation to save as many infected humans as possible from the fatal results of sin's pandemic (Gen. 3:15). That became God's mission. Since then, every person who has responded in faith and the obedience of faith to God's gospel appeal has been assigned a place in that mission. Believers in the Old Testament era accepted the covenant curses and blessings as divine interventions not only to secure them to God but also to equip them for their covenantal mission: “God be merciful to us and bless us . . . that Your way may be known on earth, Your salvation among all nations” (Ps. 67:1, 2, NKJV). That calling to mission is as true today as ever.

Every converted and baptized believer has been granted a unique covenantal assignment in God's mission to save as many people as possible: “Not more surely is the place prepared for us in the heavenly mansions than is the special place designated on earth where we are to work for God” (Christ's Object Lessons, 327).

You need not fret and worry as to the exact nature of your assignment, your special place in His mission. It is seldom some great task that you discover early in life, prepare for, and finally get accomplished at the end of your life. It's more like a commitment to fulfill the duties that lie the nearest every day. For some people, that does seem to eventually grow into a sense of a special life focus, some passion they develop, a sense of “calling” to a specific career track, some unique giftedness, some spiritual gift they seem to have that especially blesses people in a special way. The general counsel of Scripture is: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward” (Col. 3:23, 24, NIV). If you are seeking the counsel of God through His word, through prayer and godly mentors, God will continually be at work in your life, through His covenantal, disciplinary “blessings” and “curses,” to secure your way on His path and to “equip you for every good work” He calls you to accomplish, whether it be small or great. Experiencing afflictions of your own making can sometimes be part of the training/equipping process (2 Cor. 1:4).

Your ultimate covenant assignment will be something unimaginably breathtaking. When Jesus was raised from the dead, He was seated “at [the Father's] right hand in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:20, NKJV). At our conversion and baptism, God proleptically (that is, describing the future as a past event) “raised us up with [Christ], and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6, NASB). Jesus said that at His second coming He will grant to every overcomer the authority and honor “to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21). What? Yes! In the new earth you will be granted some unique role that you will absolutely love in His servant rulership over the universe. That is what your day-by-day covenant faithfulness, and what His daily covenant “blessings” and “curses,” are ultimately “thoroughly equipping” you for! Don't give up. Your future prospects are amazing!
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Leviticus 26:1–46  
2 Timothy 3:16, 17  
Isaiah 28:23–29  
Romans 8:28  
Colossians 3:22, 23  
2 Corinthians 1:3, 4  
Revelation 3:21

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Hebrews 10:19–13:21?

JESUS: YOUR PERSONAL PROTECTOR AND PERSONAL TRAINER

One line. One single biblical line, read in its context, is one of the world’s great manuals to mental health.

The line: “Endure hardship as discipline” (Heb. 12:7, NIV).

The immediate context: “The Lord disciplines the one he loves” (12:6, NIV). The wider context: Hebrews 12:5–11. For the sold-out, baptized believer, all of life is lived out within the context of covenantal discipline that puts you under protection and in training.

One paragraph—one single paragraph—orbiting Hebrews 12:5–11 and Romans 8:28 breeds a life brimming with meaning and purpose. Even though we may not always know exactly what the meaning is in real time, we know that every life event, no matter what, has the potential for covenantal protection and/or training/equipping empowers and strengthens.

The paragraph: “[1] The Father’s presence encircled Christ, and nothing befell Him but that which infinite love permitted for the blessing of the world. [2] Here was His source of comfort, and it is for us. [3] He who is imbued with the Spirit of Christ abides in Christ. [4] The blow that is aimed at him falls upon the Saviour, who surrounds him with His presence. [5] Whatever comes to him comes from Christ. [6] He has no need to resist evil, for Christ is his defense. [7] Nothing can touch him except by our Lord’s permission, and ‘all things’ that are permitted ‘work together for good to them that love God’ ” (Ellen G. White, Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, 71).

Let’s examine:
1. An invisible shield—the Father’s presence—surrounded Jesus! Nothing could get through that shield but what His Father discerned would enable Jesus to be a greater blessing day by day. That ranged from His most miracle-performing day, to a stormy-lake day, to an attack by a deranged, demon-possessed man day, to His crucifixion day, and everything in between.
2. This assurance and trust brought great comfort and empowerment to Jesus. It could, it should, do the same for us if we really believe that it applies to us also.
3. It does! If you ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit every day (Luke 11:13), if you accept Jesus’ invitation to abide in Him every day (John 15:4, 5), you are assured of the same protection and training that Jesus was provided.
4. As the Father’s presence surrounded Jesus with His presence, Jesus surrounds you with His! He evaluates everything that is aimed at you. Everything. Any hardship or challenge aimed at you falls upon Him before it reaches you. He evaluates it as to whether it has protective or training value for you.
5. Nothing reaches you unless, in Jesus’ discernment, it has that value! No matter its source of origin, Jesus invites you to accept it as coming from Him, from Him, for your protection and/or training.
6. So you do not need to waste time or energy trying to avoid or fret over trials when they come. They got through Jesus’ defense system for a reason—for a good reason. Trust Him. Redirect your energies to trusting Him and praying for discernment to know how to respond in some positive way that could bless others and honor Him.
7. Whatever touches your life has value. He is watching over you constantly to make sure of that. You can trust Him.

You don’t have to believe any of this. Many people, even some Bible scholars, scoff at it. But it’s part of the benefit package of being a member of the divine covenant. The Bible and the writings of Ellen White are saturated with this assurance. Watch for it as you read them and meditate on them.
Review the memory verse.
How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week’s study of the chapter, how has God disciplined you personally?

What are practical applications you adapt this discipline to areas around you?

GOD’S WORKMEN

“Our sorrows do not spring out of the ground. God ‘doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men.’ Lamentations 3:33. When He permits trials and afflictions, it is ‘for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness.’ Hebrews 12:10. If received in faith, the trial that seems so bitter and hard to bear will prove a blessing. The cruel blow that blights the joys of earth will be the means of turning our eyes to heaven. How many there are who would never have known Jesus had not sorrow led them to seek comfort in Him!

“The trials of life are God’s workmen, to remove the impurities and roughness from our character. Their hewing, squaring, and chiseling, their burnishing and polishing, is a painful process; it is hard to be pressed down to the grinding wheel. But the stone is brought forth prepared to fill its place in the heavenly temple. Upon no useless material does the Master bestow such careful, thorough work. Only His precious stones are polished after the similitude of a palace.…

“We also need to learn that trials mean benefit, and not to despise the chastening of the Lord nor faint when we are rebuked of Him.” (Ellen G. White, Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing, 10–11.)

“While the Lord has not promised His people exemption from trials, He has promised that which is far better. He has said, ‘As thy days, so shall thy strength be.’ ‘My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Deuteronomy 33:25; 2 Corinthians 12:9. If you are called to go through the fiery furnace for His sake, Jesus will be by your side even as He was with the faithful three in Babylon. Those who love their Redeemer will rejoice at every opportunity of sharing with Him humiliation and reproach. The love they bear their Lord makes suffering for His sake sweet.

“In all ages Satan has persecuted the people of God. He has tortured them and put them to death, but in dying they became conquerors. They revealed in their steadfast faith a mightier One than Satan. Satan could torture and kill the body, but he could not touch the life that was hid with Christ in God. He could incarcerate in prison walls, but he could not bind the spirit. They could look beyond the gloom to the glory, saying, ‘I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.’ ‘Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.’ Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17.” (White, 30.)

“God in His great love is seeking to develop in us the precious graces of His Spirit. He permits us to encounter obstacles, persecution, and hardships, not as a curse, but as the greatest blessing of our lives. Every temptation resisted, every trial bravely borne, gives us a new experience and advances us in the work of character building. The soul that through divine power resists temptation reveals to the world and to the heavenly universe the efficiency of the grace of Christ.” (White, 117.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Why does God discipline at all?

How are curses actually blessings?

When did a hardship you experienced turn out later to be a blessing in disguise?

How has God disciplined you through the covenant blessings and curses?

How has Jesus personally trained and disciplined you?

How have all things worked together for you?

How have you experienced the benefit package of being a divine covenant member? If you have not, why not yet?

How do we explain these experiences to someone who might not know Jesus?