No. 190:
Onstriving to know our duty.
Acts IX, 6. “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”

An important enquiry this, and one where we are all bound to make. In order to do our duty, we must know it. Two things then are important, knowledge, and practice. The latter, I confess, is more difficult or rare, than the former; yet I believe it will readily be granted, that we all know better than we do. This is true, at least with regard to our common or ordinary course of duty. There may be extraordinary cases, in which it may be as difficult to discern what we ought to do, as to pursue it. But after all, ignorance of duty is not confined to such cases. There is a general carelessness about enquiring for the right path, even when it would be perfectly easy to find it. When Paul was struck to the ground by power from on high...
of Jewish prejudice were taken from his mind, she
and began to open itself to the influences of divine
be exalted, in the amazement of an anxious heart
and the bitterness of penitence. Lord, what will the
have me to do? This question, myself, is not in our
heart to be often as it should be, if I were intent to
press this question upon our attention of interest.

The principle, then, on which I wish to insinuate, is this
that we are bound to endeavour with earnestness and
energy to discover what our duty is; we are bound to ask
with regard to our Maker, the question of Paul to the
Gentiles where followers he was thirsting to reconvert.

Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? Yes, the, we
are under a solemn obligation to enquire what God would
have us to do. And one reason, why there is so much
loose and superficial morality in the world, is that men
do not make this enquiry. There are certain maxims
of the world, by which in most cases we govern our con-
duct, without thinking for a moment, whether they are
well or ill founded, whether they agree with the laws
of God or not. How very seldom do we stand still, ask
ourselves, what would God have us to do? The serious
consideration of duty is one of the last things, and we fix our attention. We take up too easily the principles, the customs of the day, the deep impressions of early life, or even the caprice of the moment, may suggest, instead of these lasting and firm principles which grow out of our relations to each other in the family of man, and are dictated by conscience, as we are taught by the truths of Scripture. And all this may be done without any striking immorality of life, without any remarkable appearance of want of God's principle. But we are under a solemn obligation to do more than this: we cannot be excused from enquiring what it is the will of God we should do: this will may be discovered in various ways, in every way we should study and obey it. If that servant, who knew his Lord, will of did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes: of how much sorer punishment, think you, he shall be judged, who neither knew his Lord, will of did it, when he might both have known and done it.

I will speak first of some of the ways in which we
may discover what God would have us to do.

One way of discovering this is to give faithful heed to the dictates of our own moral sense, or in other words, to the dictates of conscience. Every man knows by experience that he has within him a capacity for moral feeling, i.e., that he approves some actions as right or condemns others as wrong, by a spontaneous sentiment of his heart, without reasoning or reflection. Now this moral feeling is given us by God; it is the finger of God writing his laws upon our hearts; of course, if uncorrupted, it is a guide to us, we ought to trust, whose assistance we ought to seek. Though it is liable to be perverted or injured by various influences, it may be stained by the impurities of the world through which we pass; it may be warped by self-interest, or crushed by fear; it may be broken down by the inroads of vice, and in fact almost entirely swept away by continual vicious indulgences, as the rush of a waterfall will sometimes tear away the most massive rocks: change the bed of a deep stream; it may be blunted by the customs of our sins of these among other evils. Yet man is an
imitative being, or rather them not be like others will sacrifice even moral feelings. To all these dangers of these sources of corruption and nature sense of right wrong is exposed, of every other way of discovering our duty is exposed, perhaps to equal danger. This circumstance, however, does by no means destroy its use; it should operate to be sure, as a caution to preserve its purity, but not as an excuse for despising its admonitions. Maintain, then, a watchful guard over your moral sense against the voice of conscience; preserve it from corruption and abuse; keep it in a sound and pure state; and then you may go to it with safety: you may consult it with secrecy a fear of being misled; it will speak to you as in the name of God; it will invite you with every promise of peace, every allurement of joy, to that is good and right; it will repel you with every threat of wrongness, every warning of woe, from what is evil and wrong; it will save upon the trouble of searching for your duty, of discussing, investigating, reasoning about it; in one word, it will teach you perfectly what God will have you to do.
In another way, we may learn some branches of our duty by considering what we are to the world around us. When brought together in society, we have duties which we could not have if each were alone—just as the different parts of a machine perform certain functions when compacted together, which they could not separately would be useless. God meant that the very state in which we are placed should teach us something of the duties of that state. And it will so, if we view it properly, consider that others have the same rights and claims with ourselves: from this source comes the rule, “do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you”; by this we are taught that it is our policy as well as our duty, to be honest, candid, just, fair, bearing the arm of mercy, open the heart of brotherly kindness, to do good for others as well as for ourselves, to be merciful as we are. In His mercy to us all. Thus when we think of the relation man to man, we find a source of instruction in duty open, where we obtain part of the answer to that great question: “What wilt thou have one to do as thou wouldst him do unto thee?”
As I trace, from which we may discern what God would have us to do, is to be found in the instructions of Scripture. The voice of divine wisdom comes to us through the sacred writers, and tells us what our duty is. There is scarcely a situation of moral difficulty that can occur in life, for which counsel or direction may not be found in the Scriptures: he who knows how to make a judicious application of them, will scarce ever go from the perusal of them without increased strength for duty, or even animation in the service of God.

It is true, we may very much abuse the instructions of Scripture by applying them in an wrong sense, or to cases where they cannot be applied with propriety or significance; whence men have sometimes endeavored to justify the most incorrigible conduct by quotations of scripture language, misapplied or pervertly misapplied. Take the plain, direct, practical instructions of Scripture for your guide; you can scarcely fail to learn what God would have you to do. To them may be justly applied the description of St. Paul: "the are profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that..."
the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished into all good works... You will there find such truths concerning the duty, a man owes to God, to his fellow man, or to himself, as you may in vain look for in any other instructions; you will feel the moment you enter in the province of duty there prescribed, that you are lifted above the common maxims of the world's morality, to have higher objects, a higher destination pointed out to you. Life assumes a new character; it is no longer a mere breathing time for gaining wealth, honours, distinction, for mutual deception & mutual distrust, for each one to gain all he can by not to regard the means of the motives; no, scripture instructions go deeper than the surface of our actions; they are not content with regulating external decencies; we must, if we obey them, enter into our duties with our whole hearts, soul, mind & strength; we must perform our duty, as unto the Lord, not unto men; knowing that while men looketh in the outward appearance, God looketh in the heart. To the thin Scriptures, then, my dear sir
as another rich source of information, when you are ready to ask, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"

Then, thus, are a specimen of the manner in which we may discover what our duty is, or in other words, what God would have us to do. These you will perceive are means within the reach of everyone. The plain, simple, natural way in which God has appointed for arriving at the knowledge of His will. Consult your own conscience, consult your reason, consult the instructions of Scripture; if you will no longer walk in darkness, but will find at least right enough to relieve you from every danger, every difficulty.

And let me remind you, that such means of discovering what you ought to do, as I have pointed out, are the only means. If you have a right to expect or to require, God will not interfere with naturally, nor will He utter a voice from heaven to teach you what He would have you to do. He has given you the natural means of learning this; if you will use these means, it will be well with you; if not, you have no right to expect that
G. will grant, by other extraordinary means. Some people wait for what they call the indications of providence, for some particular omen to guide them to their duty. They expect particular interpretations of providence, while they wait for them imagination soon finds them. Any event, the most simple natural, is construed into a mysterious page of what ought to be done, or if not found their duty, it is only by the chance of a lottery. Now this is destroying the fountain of living water, boring out to ourselves broken cisterns, that can hold no water. We must use our reason in discerning what G. would have us to do, just as much as we must use our reason in the common business concerns of life; there is in fact no other way in which we can know our duty correctly, our knowledge is tended to be acquired in any other way: power too often to be but an unsubstantial foundation of the structure of good works reared upon it in too many cases falls to the ground. We must build upon the ground of what God has taught us in our moral constitutions, not
of the Scriptures of truth, or then the minds of the tenants will not easily demolish the edifice.

We will proceed to speak of the manner in which we should apply the knowledge of duty, which once obtained. "If ye know these things, happy are ye, if ye do them." In vain for us will it be, if we ask with ever so much earnestness, "Lord, what wilt thou have us to do?" and then go our ways without paying the least heed to the answer we may obtain. There seem to be two classes of duty, with regard to which thequiring in our text should be made, and the result applied. The 1st class is the common and ordinary duties of the moral course of life. With regard to these our conscience should be, "What wilt thou have us to do?" and then we should apply all the results of reasoning conscience and Scripture to the faithful discharge of these duties. We shall soon learn that among our common and every day duties are to be reckoned, such as fidelity to our engagements, unbroken integrity, honesty of purchase, pure unfeigned benevolence, temperance, self-restraint, piety toward God, charity toward our of parents.
man. Be it then no case that all these duties are carried into vigorous and faithful exercise; if they are the duties of all times and places, nothing can release us from their obligation; nothing can prevent us from performing them, but our own perversity and inculence. It is true, even in the exercise of the common duties of life, much discretion is to be used. Regard must be had to times, places, & circumstances. The young of the old, the rich of the poor, the ignorant of the refined, the master of the servant, the ruler of the subject, have each their respective duties, which belong not to the other. The who should step out of this sphere, is respect his own to perform another's duty, would sin against the laws of God. And even with regard to the same individual, his duties at different times and on different occasions, are quite different; not that fundamental principles of right conduct are ever to be abandoned, but it is manifest that the same things are not always to be done; nay, we may go further and say, that what is right in some cases is wrong in others, because the relations of circumstances are changed. The
I goodness, an imperious feeling of obligation. It is
then we have more especial need to say... what shall
there have me to do? What course shall I take with
these perplexing difficulties and embarrassments? In
such cases, help, we must consult the sources above
mentioned; we must ask of conscience, how the faith-
fully what are its dictates; we must ask of reason
what it has to impart... above all we must ask of the
truths of Scripture, what instruction they can afford.
When we have once clearly determined what the
course of duty is, we must pray, that our steps
shall not... in all this, we must set a strong guard
against our indolence, our self-love, our fears; all
these passions which would lead us astray from the right
path, we would keep our judgment, of intermingling
their own hints with the suggestions of the better
guide... To the great duties of our social duties, we require
provisions, self-denial, suffering, and endurance; it is for
us undeniably important that all these principles should
be strenuously applied. For the law of nature is inex-
orably severe, all passions so strong that the...
open, to let no day pass without lifting up your heart to heaven, in the deep spirit of devotion, humility, and with the question of the trembling Saul, 

"O! what wilt thou have me to do?"

May, 1823.

At home, June 15th, 1823—afternoon.

At home, Oct. 4th, 1823—forenoon.