The question of just what constituted the apostle Paul’s thorn in the flesh has been speculated upon and debated for a long time. This brief essay seeks to settle the matter once and for all. To arrive at our conclusion, we shall make use of the pertinent Pauline Bible texts as well as the inspired writings of Ellen G. White.

In four notable instances, the apostle refers to the fact that he has composed his epistles in characters writ large. Two plausible reasons for writing in large print are: (a) his audience included visually impaired readers, or (b) he suffered some sort of visual impairment himself. It seems obvious that the second reason is the more logical one, though Paul may well have formed large characters in such a way that his readers would recognize instantly his peculiar “signature.” Here are the four texts:

1 Cor. 16:21. “The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand.”

Gal. 6:11a. “Ye shall see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand.”

Col. 4:18. “The salutation by the hand of me Paul.”

2 Thess. 3:17. “The salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write.”

A discussion of the possible reason lying behind Paul’s similar comments in the preceding texts is in order. To unpack the reason, let us permit the man to speak for himself, at least, so far as there Bible texts reveal his motive:

2 Cor. 12:7–9. “Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

Gal. 4:15b. “I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.”

Gal. 6:17. “From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.”

Using some of Paul’s very own words, Ellen G. White added additional pointed comments, which I have arranged to produce a completely satisfactory explanation for all seven texts cited above. For instance, we may be confident that Paul’s “marks of Christ’s glory” involved severe visual impairment and were not the result of his many other physical persecutory scars. Notice this plain comment: “Paul had a bodily affliction; his eyesight was bad. He thought that by earnest prayer the difficulty might be removed. But the Lord had His own purpose, and He said to Paul, Speak to Me no more of this matter. My grace is sufficient. It will enable you to bear the infirmity” (Lt 207, Dec. 15, 1899, in 6BC 1107.5 & 14MR 57.1).
“He was ever to carry about with him in the body the marks of Christ’s glory, in his eyes, which had been blinded by the heavenly light, and he desired also to bear with him constantly the assurance of Christ’s sustaining grace” (3SP 319.0 & LP 34.1, in SR 275.1). Recall that as Saul the persecutor, the sudden convert who would become the great apostle Paul had had a direct encounter with Jesus on his way to Damascus, the immediate result being three days of total blindness due to the dazzling brilliance of Christ’s glory (see Acts 9:1–9).

“He felt that the disease under which he suffered was a terrible impediment to him in his great work, and repeatedly besought the Lord to relieve him. God did not see fit to answer his prayers in this respect, though He gave him assurance that divine grace should be sufficient for him” (LP 176.0). This is an obvious cross-reference to 2 Cor. 12:7–9, where Paul describes how he came to be content with his famous “thorn in the flesh.” It is commonly understood that when Paul speaks of being buffeted by Satan, we understand this to mean that the affliction may have been of Satan’s doing while ultimately of God’s permission for a greater purpose (compare Job’s experience).

Notice that the Greek word skolops is used, as though Paul's “thorn” were, figuratively, a highly bothersome, deep-driven sliver. I once had such a wood sliver forcefully driven under a fingernail. It had to be removed in a hospital emergency room, with nearly enough pain to cause this strapping young man to pass out! To the sufferer of any troublesome bodily infirmity, it must seem this annoying. Even Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary recognizes the expression thorn in one’s side as meaning something that causes distress or irritation.

With ample evidence from the inspired testimony of both Paul and the Spirit of Prophecy writings, it is thus wholly unnecessary to dredge up theories and speculations regarding Paul’s impediment. Today we would deem his condition legal blindness. When the Lord rejected his prayers for relief, he learned to cope with his optical affliction, compensated when necessary in his writing with the use of a personal amanuensis and by his residual ability to authenticate his work through the employment of a unique large-print signature. His Greek name, transliterated today as Paulos, must have looked something like this to his readers:

Παύλος