

## Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

Jerry A. Stevens

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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 his peculiar "signature" instantly. 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 discover the reason, let us permit the man to speak for himself, at least, so far as three 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." This is the "infirmity of the flesh" to which he has just alluded in verse 13.
- **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. Luke records the encounter in Acts 9:1–9. In verse 3 we read that “suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth.” Years later, Paul would testify bound in chains before the populace in Jerusalem, including the detail that “about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. And I fell to the ground” (Acts 22:6, 7).

“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.

Another key point that comes from the apostle’s final testimony must now be made. Appearing manacled before King Herod Agrippa II, Paul once again recounts his stunning conversion experience on the road to Damascus. He describes this sudden “midday” encounter with Jesus Christ as “a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And . . . we were all fallen to the earth” (Acts 26:13, 14).

Ellen White adds further detail. That light was “too glorious for mortal man to bear. Blinded and bewildered, Saul fell prostrate to the ground. While the light continued to shine about them, Saul heard a voice” (AA 114.1, 2), issuing from none other than Jesus Himself. “The glory of the light of heaven had blinded him” (1SG 91.0). “This wonderful revelation [of the glorified Jesus speaking directly to him] so affected Saul’s eyesight that he was instantly made blind, but the eyes of his spiritual understanding were enlightened” (Ms 46, March 29, 1899).

Today, August 21, 2017, has been a very special one across the entire continental United States. Billed as the Great American Eclipse, for the first time since 1918 a coast-to-coast total solar eclipse has taken place, and this writer happened to be fortunate enough to live within the 70-mile wide “path of totality” right here in Fairfield Glade, Tennessee. Warnings had been issued to everyone who wanted to view the phenomenon that in order

to avoid the very real possibility of solar retinopathy (permanent damage to the retina, which functions as the immediate instrument of vision), safety eclipse glasses with special-purpose solar filters must have been placed over the eyes (or alternatively donning a welding helmet with good darkening filter!). Thinking this through, I had to muse inwardly: If staring at the sun for a couple minutes or so without proper protection might be so damaging to one's eyes, what effect on the eyesight of Saul of Tarsus must have been his viewing a supernatural light from heaven that was brighter than our midday sun!

With ample evidence from the inspired testimony both of Paul and the Spirit of Prophecy writings before us, plus a little common sense, 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 from his debilitating "thorn," he learned to cope with his optical affliction, compensated when necessary in his writings with the use of a personal scribe, or 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 (bearing in mind that the Greek alphabet employed uppercase letters exclusively):

**ΠΑΥΛΟΣ**