

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Ron Hall and Denver Moore had one of the most unlikely friendships that you could ever imagine. They were about as different as two men can be. Denver was a homeless African American man living on the streets of Fort Worth, Texas. He had been a sharecropper in Louisiana and had gone to prison for trying to rob a bus at gunpoint. Ron was a bond trader turned art dealer, a college graduate, married, living in the suburbs with his wife, Deborah, and their two children. They met when Ron and Deborah began volunteering at the Union Gospel Mission in Ft Worth, and it was there that their friendship began to develop.

While their relationship began as the haves sharing with the have nots, it quickly becomes a friendship between equals. When Deborah was diagnosed with liver cancer, Denver becomes her most fervent prayer warrior, pouring his heart out to God for her. Her death becomes a catalyst for Ron and Denver to become more like brothers than friends. Each man discovered something in the other that he needed, something that God had put there as a surprise gift, one that could be discovered only when each of them opened himself to a friendship with someone as different as they could be. Their story forms the basis for the book, *Same Kind of Different as Me*.

God often places people into our lives who we might not have chosen as friends for ourselves. Maybe you've met someone in your life who may be different from you in background, profession, beliefs, or other ways. You may not

have sought them out, but God gave you a chance to receive the gifts that he had placed within them. Our lesson for today introduces us to another unlikely encounter as God set the stage for another divine surprise.

It's about 135 miles from Jerusalem to Damascus. Several days journey by horse. The man taking that journey was named Saul. He came from Tarsus, a crossroads of land and sea trade located in present day Turkey. Saul was a devout Jew, a member of the Pharisees, a follower and enforcer of the Law. His task on this journey was to find and root out members of this troublesome bunch of heretics that called themselves The Way. They followed this man called Jesus, the one that the Roman Governor, Pilate, had crucified.

Normally, that execution would have put an end to their nonsense and the followers would have scattered to the four winds. But these followers declared that this Jesus was the Messiah which was bad in and of itself, but they went further than that. They claimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead and that he was truly the Son of God. It was this kind of nonsense that troubled Saul the most as he road on the Damascus road that day.

Then came a flash of light that blinded him and caused his horse to throw him to the ground. There was that voice that claimed to be Jesus calling out to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul's eyes were opened, but he was blind. The men who were traveling with him were confused because they could hear the voice, but could see no one and it was a bright and sunny day. The voice told them that they were to continue on to the city where they would be told what to do. They did as they were told. They took him to the house of a man named Judas in the city of Damascus and the text tells us that for three days, while he was blind, he neither ate nor drank.

Ananias was a disciple of The Way living in Damascus. He had a vision in which the Lord told him to go to Judas' house on Straight Street where he would find the blinded Saul praying. Saul had experienced his own vision and was expecting Ananias to come and lay hands upon him and restore his sight. But Ananias wasn't too sure about this. He complained to God that this man was dangerous. But the Lord tells him to go and he shares a little secret that Saul is to be his instrument to share the Gospel. So Ananias went and did as he was told. He laid healing hands upon Saul and surprise, the change in Saul was instantaneous. Ananias baptized Saul and as he did, all that Saul had doubted and dismissed was now real to him and after he regained his strength following his fast, he began to proclaim to everyone that Jesus was the Son of God.

Ananias and Saul were natural enemies. They were headed on a collision course, not a bromance, as Saul was making his way to Damascus. Saul had a reputation. He stood guard over the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr and one of Ananias' brothers in the faith. When Ananias was told to go to Saul and lay healing hands upon him in healing prayer, it's no surprise that he balks, wondering if Saul will instead lay hands on him in a different way. God assures him that this Saul is "an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel." Only God knows how he can use someone, no matter how lost or antagonistic they may seem to us.

For Saul, the change was dramatic. In an instant, the life that he had before was a thing of the past and a new life, and purpose, was laid out before him. He was a new man, a new creation in Christ, emboldened in a way that only Spirit can embolden you. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and he was ready to get to work doing the mission to which God had called him.

God is full of surprises. Saul will become Paul, an apostle whose witness will forever change the spread of faith in Christ around the world. We should keep our eyes open to those around us, asking if God has called us to enter their lives in improbable but holy friendship. After all, the most unlikely friendship that could have developed is the one between the Creator of the universe and us, his creations. Who could imagine that our Creator and Lord would long to become our friend, even as antagonistic as we may have originally been to the idea. Ananias and Saul show us that God can call us to put aside our differences and serve him together.