

I Finally Heard The Lion's Roar

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“We can’t focus on vengeance and still do the things that need to be done.”
Bob Marley, Jamaican Singer & Songwriter

For me it would be a search that took decades, from the time when I was 6 years old until I finally visited Kenya in May of 2025. At 64 years of age, that is where I found something I had been looking for all those many years. In Kenya, I finally heard the lion’s roar.

All of this happened simply because a good friend, Bruce Bryan, connected me with the Justice Defenders in the United Kingdom. This amazing non-profit works in three African nations to help those falsely imprisoned get a fair trial and maybe gain their freedom too. Through their efforts many have been released. Founded in 2007, Justice Defenders has helped over 70,000 people get free and they are not slowing down any time soon. You probably already know this and are wondering what is their connection to me, and exactly how does a roaring lion fit into this whole picture? I’ll get there, but some background on me will help to make the connection clear. As a well-known American radio journalist, the late Paul Harvey used to say;

“Now you’ll hear...the rest of the story.”



Starfish Ministries Colorado, my non-profit in the US, is much smaller. We began operations in 2018. Our focus is in the fight against child sex trafficking. I am a survivor of that as a preteen boy. Today Starfish provides a public voice for biological boys and men who are survivors like me. In my life the abuse began around age 4, when I was groomed and quickly handed over to groups of adults for sexual abuse until I was almost age 10. This took place in a small American midwestern farming community during the 1960's. Men (and women too by the way) bought and sold me for sex. I was used in child pornography at age 7. Many today prefer to call it CSAM or child sexual abuse material. I don't really care what it's called, as the impact on the kid is the same. Also at age 7-8, I was subjected to satanic ritual abuse. By the age of 9, I knew how to drink whiskey, smoke and all about pornography. It all left deep scars inside of me. Ultimately when my parents divorced, my mom found a new job in Arizona and we moved away from that town.



Sean – Age 9 years

While the predators in our old town never got me again others would still find me into my teens. They know how to spot a kid who is used to it, and they use that weakness to get them to cooperate. It worked on me. I just believed that was what adults got to do to me, so went along with it. I didn't know I had a choice.

It was programming from an enemy I could not even understand. The abuse continued off and on until I was age 19 when I finally had enough and drew my own line in the sand, saying to myself never again. That decision came at a heavy price as the great sadness turned inward and became depression.

After four decades of me living in shame, guilt and fear, I met Susan who became my amazing wife. She was the first person to hear my story and still love me anyway. It was Susan too who gently pushed me into Christian Counseling. Through that I found freedom in Christ. I learned to know who God really is, and He is definitely not what evil people taught me. I discovered my purpose, which is to share my testimony. Today I get to make a difference in the lives of others. Millions around the globe have heard me speak and I will keep speaking as long as God allows. It is not about what people did to me, or my own stupid mistakes. It is about what God has done in me, for me, and what He can now do through me as a willing messenger. I have become a dangerous man to the enemy. All of this to His glory, not mine.

So how does all this tie into Justice Defenders? I'm getting there, but there is just a little bit more I need to add. It is this.

Much later as an adult after losing yet another job, I just got tired of seeing my life defined by a lie. Giving up the fight and giving it to God, I learned that I am not damaged goods as I was taught. I learned about forgiveness and have forgiven those who hurt me. I have forgiven myself too for blaming it all on me. Forgiveness doesn't set others free. It sets us free and leaves justice up to God alone. Besides, most were strangers. I don't know their names but God does, so I must leave it to Him. All I had to do was to take His and let go of the blame-game. It's a tragic thing to lay down on yourself a life sentence when God holds the pardon in His hand.

Bob Marly was absolutely right when he said we can't focus on vengeance, and still do the things that need to be done. I focused on that and other negative feelings for many years and it did me no good. Today when I pray for God's justice, I always try ask for His mercy and grace to be equal parts with that. He's shown me much grace and I still need His forgiveness today, as one has a perfect walk. All God asks in return is that we follow His example and forgive others who have hurt us. In other words, share the grace God poured out on you with others who need it too, and don't give into hate.



“Then you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free! (John 8:32)

Jesus

That is the tie to Justice Defenders, it's about sharing hope with the hopeless. Late last year after Bruce had told them about me, their founder Alexander McLean reached out with an invitation to talk. We had an incredible conversation. As I understood it, they encounter men and women in prisons with my background. Alexander and his group are strong Christians, but finding the right words to connect with these folks is difficult, especially if one has never lived through that as I have. In Kenya's prisons I would find many who are just like the old me. They simply do not know how to trust anyone enough to let down their guard and accept help. Justice Defenders share a gospel message that transforms lives, but it won't work if people believe they are just too broken for God to love them too. So it was that Alexander asked if I would come to Africa to be their voice to survivors in prison. Of course, I had to say yes.



Kenyan Prison Service

We visited 5 prisons in Kenya over the course of a week, and that verse above about a truth was painted on the wall of at least one of them. Some just need to hear that truth from another who experienced the same kind of hurt. It's almost like getting permission to say “ok I'll try one more time.” I truly understand that broken feeling, so I let them know that Psalm 34:18 puts it this way; “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

“And that lion, where does he fit?”

For that I must return briefly to when I was 6 years old. Around that age my mom gave me a book about the animals in Kenya. As a little kid I remember reading it and thinking: *If I could just get to Kenya, and live with the lions, they would keep me safe from the bad people.* It set in my heart a lifelong desire to see Africa, and I finally got to go there 6 decades later.

That’s proof enough for me today on one very important point. Even though evil people stole much of my innocence, they didn’t take it all. They could not steal from me a child’s imagination or my hope that a lion could and would protect me from harm. Ultimately a lion did, the Lion of Judah. The ironic thing is this. The very pain from which I wanted escape in the US as a child, is what eventually took me to Kenya many years after it all ended. God flipped the story and took what was meant for my harm and turned it to something good, just as He did for Joseph in Egypt.



Now, I’m not a member of the Maasai tribe, so today I won’t foolishly go up to just any lion and simply try to give him a big hug, much as I want to. He’s not the Lion of Judah, he’s the lion of Kenya. I can see how that would play out. It would most likely annoy him, and he just might decide right then and there he’s in the mood for American food on that day. Well ok then, I will love on the lions from a safe distance. Even so, in Nairobi when I made that connection in my heart, that was the first time on this trip that I heard the lion’s roar. Metaphorically of course and I wanted very much to hear a lion’s roar for real. Soon enough I would get my chance.

We were having dinner one evening at an outside restaurant. Eventually I had to make my way to the restroom. While walking down the open pathways that’s when I heard it, a real lion. His roar stopped me right there in my tracks. You could take the best surround-sound system, multiply it by 10-fold and not recreate the majesty of what I heard in the quiet shank of a Kenyan evening. One of the staff noticed and said;

“Ah, you heard one of our lions!”

“Yes” I replied and then asked “is it real?”

“Oh, he’s very real” my new friend assured me.

“Is he just over this wall?” says I.

“No” the young man quietly assured me. “If he was there, we would not be here. He is about 2 miles away.”

Two miles, that’s *amazing*! He sounded to me like he was little more than 10 feet distant at best. Later I would discover that a full-grown African lion’s roar can be heard up to 5 miles away on Kenya’s savannah. That’s just over 8km for the metrics folks. It’s impressive either way and that’s when I heard him for the first time. It would not be the last. To my mind, that roar has to be part of the reason God chose the lion to represent Judah in scripture. It is a powerful thing to hear for real. To see one standing proudly in Kenya’s vast grasslands is powerful too. I think it’s a picture of how God wants us to be: free and unafraid.

Honestly when I agreed to visiting Africa, I had no idea what I was getting into. I figured since God had opened this door; I better quickly walk through it. Besides, God and Alexander’s team would provide the answers soon enough. It took me from early evening on Friday in Colorado till Sunday afternoon to reach Nairobi. I don’t sleep much or well on airplanes in economy class, so some 40 hours of travel later I arrived exhausted but also reenergized by finally being on Kenyan soil, and getting to meet my new friends for the first time.



Entry at Thika Main Prison, Thika Town, Kenya – Babita Patel Photography

We went straight away from the airport to our first prison visit. I was asked to speak that day, as I am now an ordained pastor in a charismatic ministry. It's a good thing I had time on the plane ride to write something. Besides, I've done it before when I've worked in the Dream Center Jail Ministry in Los Angeles, California. That experience however, is nothing like what I was about to encounter in Kenya. Unlike in the USA, the prisons there are run very differently. Yet not even once did I ever feel in any kind of danger. And, unlike some I work with in the US, in Kenya my race and gender did not matter to anyone. Inside and out of the prisons, I was welcomed, accepted and loved just as I am.



Sean Wheeler speaking in a Kenyan prison, May 2025 – Photo courtesy of JD/CNN

It made me think again back to when I was growing up. My mom was a fan of Dr. Martin Luther King and she taught us not to look race, just as he preached. That message sank in and it sticks with me today. It's not that I don't see color, I just don't care. Besides, the bible very clearly says *we are all* created in His image. Men, women, black, white, Jew or gentile...when God says all of us, He means it. That's solid ground for me.

Before I found Christ, I was actually very stoic and emotionless in public unless it was to be defensive. For years after age 19, I trusted almost no one and expected the worst from almost everyone. That's all changed today. My new friends will easily (and cheerfully) tell you that I know longer hold back the tears. It's true, and I accept that part of the new me. At times I am a little embarrassed by how easily things can bring tears to my eyes, such as when I look at some of the amazing pictures our team photographer Babita Patel has taken. Yet this is who I am now.

American writer Washington Irving once said that tears are not a mark of weakness but of power. Tears are messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition and unspeakable love. Tears are still healing the deep wounds within me today. I've tried to hold them back sometimes, but am mostly unsuccessful at doing so. I'm told they add a layer of transparency to my words, and in that an emotional truth shows as well.

In Kenya, Justice Defenders staff told me too that when I tear up while speaking with men in particular, it helps them see there is no shame in males crying. There, just like in many other countries, men and boys are taught to be tough and never cry. Well, I can think of no one stronger than Christ himself, and the shortest verse in the bible says this in John 11:35 "Jesus wept." In tears, Christ again fully shared in our humanity. The bible in Psalm 56:8 says that God collects all of our tears in a single bottle, and that He remembers each one. That means our tears share the same bottle which hold those of Christ himself, and that is powerful healing.

Thus, in the prisons I knew at least some of them experienced what had happened in my life too. I let them know it was not ever their fault, and they are not damaged people. They are not defined by what bad people did to them. God's word says He sees each of us as a masterpiece and *that* is who we are. Scripture also says He carves their names in the palm of His hand. God already knows everything that happened to them. He loves them enough to meet them right where they are today, but too much to leave them there. Together the Justice Defenders team let prisoners know that whatever trial they are facing now, they do not have to face it alone. I'll add that the abuse is not the end of my story, and it does not have to be the end of theirs either. It was my joy to share in that message of hope.

With Justice Defenders, I have found a place where I belong and fit in. I found love given to me at a level I've not experienced much before in my years of anti-trafficking work. During that first prison visit, just like with all the others we went to later on, we saw lives changed...and for eternity. They have Alexander, his team and me too all praying for them. We let them know they can have the Creator of the Universe standing right beside them too. I tell them that we do our fighting first in prayer, and that is a powerful weapon for good. We start in prayer; we continue in prayer and we end in prayer with thanks to God. In every prison, people came to me later and told me they were ready now to work with Justice Defenders. I thank God for that and for them. Mission accomplished. No one can tell me today the God I worship does not move mountains. I've seen too much evidence to the contrary in my own life. I saw it again many times in the prisons.



In those moments, I once again heard the lion's roar. I also heard it when listening to all of the other incredible speakers; Kenyans, the British and American's. I heard it when listening those in our group tell their own unique stories and the struggles they have gone through. We all came from diverse backgrounds yet we fully support each other without judgement or conditions. I think Alexander calls us a group of unlikely allies. That's certainly true.



Justice Defenders team, prison staff and inmates share a moment of joy in a Kenyan women's prison, May 2025
Babita Patel Photography

Some have told me that one man alone can't fight an entire army of injustice in this world. Perhaps not, *but ideas can*. Ideas can shine a light on injustice and we can each carry a single light. The more lights that shine together, the more of the darkness of this world will disappear. I fully believe the Justice Defenders are shining a light so bright on a broken system that it's already resulted in positive changes. More people are listening and more changes will come. What's working in Africa can change prison systems in the USA and around the world as well. Together, we can and we will get loud enough so that people can no longer simply refuse to listen.

It will be a sound like that lion I heard in the restaurant. It will stop people in their tracks and ask themselves; *is that for real?* Yes, it very much is. Join us!

Finally, I was asked to point to anything I think Justice Defenders could do better. I really have no idea what that could possibly be. No system is perfect but they rely on God to refine the gold in them just as He is doing in me. I saw no flaws in their system. When plans change on a moment's notice, they handle that with grace every time. As for me it's been a gift on many levels. I've made new friends now in both Kenya and Uganda too, and from the UK and USA of course, and discovered a whole new level of purpose in my life.

This journey of mine has often been a lonely walk, because male survivors are not always welcomed in the fight against child sexual abuse. All my life people have judged me even before they got to know me. I think the same is true for many of those in prison. To them we offer a new image of themselves. We let them know that each one of them brings a gift to humanity's table which only they possess. They are special and they are not forgotten. They are loved. Thus, as I looked beyond that narrow focus of my past experiences, I found much love and support for me too with Justice Defenders. Just like they pour out onto the many in prisons who they help.

Are you wondering if supporting Justice Defenders can make a difference? I hope my story shows that it absolutely can. We are not called to try to do it alone, and no one person can do it all anyway. Not all are called to go into prisons in Africa. Yet, any donation large or small will make a difference in the lives of people. In the bible God even says that His hope is that none should perish. That most certainly includes those who are forgotten in African prisons, and in prisons around the world too.



Think of it like tossing a pebble in a pond and seeing the ripples grow ever larger till they reach the water's edge. The more stones the bigger the ripple! If you decide to toss one in, and listen closely with your heart, maybe you'll hear the lion's majestic roar in the cries of joy from those who find their freedom. I suspect that like me, it will stop you in your tracks. You'll know beyond any doubt that you are making a real difference in this world. Together in Christ, we can do this.

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Sean Wheeler is a survivor of child sex trafficking. Today he is published author, public speaker and founder of Starfish Ministries in the USA. (www.starfishcolorado.org.) Photos provided by Photographer & Storyteller Babita Patel, CNN and open sources. Babita's work can be found at: www.babitapatelphotography.com. Information on Justice Defender is found at: www.justice-defenders.org/