



**A SEARCH
FOR ANSWERS**

Shazier spends hours on his back porch—writing, praying and thinking.

THE PASTOR,
HIS PORCH
AND HIS
FIGHT WITH
FAITH



ADAM LACY/CSM/SHUTTERSTOCK

A man of God and man of football,
VERNON SHAZIER
was tested as never before on the night his
oldest son lay motionless on the field

BY
GREG BISHOP
PHOTOGRAPH BY
JEFFERY A. SALTER



THE AFTERMATH

Following a routine tackle during a Monday-night game in Cincinnati, Ryan was carted off with a spinal cord injury; he remained unable to walk for months (below, opposite).

of feeling below his waist. He didn't have time to wonder whether the boy would ever walk again. *Daddy, pray for me. I can't feel my legs.* "I'll never forget those words," he says.

The Steelers would soon send a private plane to transport the family to Ohio. Vernon understood that he was not the first parent to watch a loved one fall limp on a football field. He loved the game and knew the risks; for years, he had prayed for and with NFL players. He had counseled parishioners as they confronted death and tragedy. This, though, was different, sudden and personal. Right away, he knew that he had a problem, that he would have to square his life's calling with his son's injury. But how?

Over the next few months, the public followed Ryan's progress on drips of social media as he fought to walk again.

THE PORCH doubles as the pastor's office and his sanctuary. It's where he writes sermons, studies philosophy and wrestles with everything from mass shootings to the violence inherent in pro football. It's early September, the Florida heat sticky, bugs swarming the lights. Gold Terrible Towels hang above the pastor's desk, next to the rolling book cart stuffed with self-help volumes, both tucked against the house, protected by the awning overhead.

Youthful, bespectacled and clean shaven, the pastor wears Steelers flip-flops and a T-shirt with SHALIEVE splashed across the front. He clutches a Cuban cigar in his right hand, and he pauses for the occasional puff. The NFL season kicked off the night before, but he didn't watch one play—he hardly watches football anymore. Instead, he retreated to the porch, hoping to find peace. And if not peace, then wisdom. And if neither peace nor wisdom, then at least a break from searching for both.

The pastor twirls the cigar as he laughs about porches. He's not sure why, but in his 49 years on Earth, in his various incarnations—Navy seaman, engineer, pastor, team chaplain for the Dolphins, football dad and anguished parent—he has found being outdoors

more conducive to contemplation. That's why, five years ago, he bought this house in Coral Springs with the expansive space out back, and why he outfitted it with lounge chairs, speakers that pipe in jazz and notebooks to be filled.

Most people, the pastor says, should spend more time thinking about issues that don't impact them directly. It's difficult, though. He spent a good portion of his adulthood helping others overcome their problems—counseling, encouraging, simplifying. *Trust your convictions*, he'd tell them, until the day when he couldn't fully trust his own. A new football season is here, making the weight of it feel a little heavier. "The last 20 months," Vernon Shazier says, "I've wrestled with my faith more than I ever had in my life."



EVERYTHING CHANGED nearly two years ago. On Dec. 4, 2017, Vernon was wrapping up a meeting at his church, River of Life Fellowship, when his wife began bombarding his cell. Shawn had been home, watching their son, Pro Bowl linebacker Ryan Shazier, command the Pittsburgh defense against the Bengals. Her husband at first ignored the calls, at one point texting back that he was in a meeting. Then she buzzed again, and this time

His phone buzzed again. This time it was Ryan, calling from the ambulance. "Daddy, pray for me, I CAN'T FEEL MY LEGS." I'll never forget those words," Vernon says.

he stepped out and took the call, "Ryan's hurt," Shawn said frantically, "he's not moving!"

That night, she had watched as Ryan called out signals for the Steelers defense in a Monday night game in Cincinnati. She watched him sprint forward to tackle a receiver on a short crossing route—the kind of play she'd watched him make a thousand times before. She watched as he crumpled to the ground after contact, immediately reaching for his lower back. And she watched as he writhed on the ground for more than two minutes as medical staffers from both teams surrounded him—the broadcast cutting away to close-ups of concerned teammates and slow-motion replays—until he was loaded onto a stretcher and carted off the field.

Vernon grabbed his briefcase and sprinted to his truck. He was backing out when his phone buzzed again. This time it was Ryan, calling from the ambulance. "Daddy, pray for me," he screamed. "I can't feel my legs."

"That showed me how fast everything can change," Vernon says. "You go from holding all kings to no face cards. Doesn't matter who you are."

In that moment Vernon couldn't consider the bigger questions. He didn't ask why the God he loved so dearly had robbed his oldest son, the world-class athlete, only 25,

What people didn't see was his family's struggle and his father's crisis. A man who saw all life events as part of a divine plan was now wondering, suddenly, how to console his own shattered family. That night Vernon fell to his knees on the porch, begging God both to heal Ryan and help him understand.

The Shaziers flew to Cincinnati, then traveled with Ryan to Pittsburgh two days later. Shortly after they arrived at a hospital near the team's facility, they learned that Ryan needed emergency surgery to stabilize his spine. "When?" his father asked.

"Twenty minutes," the doctor replied.

Vernon wanted to project strength, even when his knees wobbled and his eyes burned with grief. He did his weeping in private, behind the bolted door of a hospital men's room stall. Or tugging on an overcoat so he could sit inside his car, tears freezing as they rolled down his cheeks. "I probably cried 15 to 20 times a day," he says, "but never in front of anyone else."

He also spent those breaks in isolation talking to himself. *Vernon, you have to decide whether you believe or don't believe what you've been teaching and preaching about God.*

Every day he would send a group text to his wife, his

two sons (Ryan and Vernon II) and Ryan's then-fiancée, Michelle Rodriguez. Always, he tapped out the same message. *God is with us. God is with you. God is helping you. God is healing you.* Still, the months dragged by while Ryan lay in a hospital bed, unable to walk, the father fearing that his son might be paralyzed forever. Vernon flew home on the weekends to address his congregation in Fort Pierce, Fla. For all those weeks he preached about the character, power and attributes of God. His audience might have assumed he was trying to motivate them in light of Ryan's catastrophic injury. But really he was preaching to himself, waging both an internal debate and an existential one.

He held different conversations when alone, the tenor more honest and far more complicated. Was there a purpose to Ryan's injury? And, if God was responsible for all the good things in his life, wasn't he accountable for this too? "I had to make a decision," Vernon says. "I believed. Or I didn't."

Vernon and Shawn took turns at the hospital, ensuring that someone sat by Ryan's side, every day, every night, for months. On one shift Vernon had what he describes as an out-of-body experience. He could see himself looking down from above, trying to switch bodies with his son. When he came out of it he could still walk; Ryan could not. "That's a hurt a parent has for their child," Vernon says. "When they see them down, in trouble, they're willing to sacrifice their body for their children's pain."

Vernon couldn't handle all the visitors who would come by with the best intentions then break down until everyone was crying. After those moments he would often head to Ryan's house in Pittsburgh, to spend time on his son's porch. He would sit there, even when temperatures dipped into the teens.

GOD," VERNON said one night out there in the darkness, "I'm all in."

He had come to realize he knew no other way. His entire life, he believed, had pointed and prepared him for this crisis. He had watched his mom after his parents divorced and his father left, how she took on three jobs and raised four kids in Fort Pierce. He had given up his dream of college football to enlist in the Navy and help her pay the bills. He became an engineer and worked for Motorola; coached high school football in the fall, and went back to college every spring, hanging three degrees on his wall; got married and had two sons.

He'd think back to 1995, when he found his calling, gave

up nightclubs and started to imbue his life with purpose. He had been sitting in church one Sunday, and he saw a vision from his childhood, when two strangers told him he would become a preacher. The sermon that Sunday was titled, "Don't forget your calling." That day, he found his.

While shivering on Ryan's porch, he would consider the times his faith had been rewarded. How five years after that vision, Vernon had packed up his young family, thrown everything he owned into a U-Haul and moved to Waco, Texas, so that he could study at Baylor's

INSPIRATION

Teammates, including Cam Heyward (left) and James Harrison, paid tribute to Shazier one week after the injury.



theological seminary. He had no money in his savings account and would have no steady income. Shawn would be diagnosed with Crohn's disease, leaving her unable to work; Ryan would be diagnosed with alopecia, leading to hair loss and incessant teasing from classmates. Vernon saw these as more tests, and he leaned on his faith to overcome them.

As months went by after Ryan's injury, he waited and prayed. Then, finally, the breakthrough. Vernon doesn't want to reveal too many specifics about his son's injury or recovery, saying that Ryan wants to tell his own story, in his own time. But Vernon will reveal the first event he describes as a "miracle." He says that Ryan turned to him inside his hospital room, several months after the hit, and said, "Dad, I think I just s----- on myself." Vernon says he jumped up and down. Or maybe he screamed—he can't remember much except the euphoria he felt. The fact that

Ryan could feel anything *was* a miracle, and not one that Vernon will attribute only to doctors or science.

More positivity followed. The Steelers' linebackers had taken to holding position meetings in Ryan's hospital room, staying afterward to order steaks or play dominoes or lose themselves in Fortnite mazes. Then, another breakthrough. With his teammates watching, Shazier wiggled a leg. The whole room went berserk.

LAST SPRING, for the first time since the injury, Vernon says he finally “felt a sense of normalcy again.” Nights and mornings on the porch helped. So did his son's progress. “They said he'd probably never be able to walk again,” Vernon says. “He's not 100%. But he's on his way back.”

Ryan has gone from a hospital bed to a wheelchair, then a walker, then two canes, then one. He can walk, drive, care for himself, brush his teeth, lift weights, even jog. To most, the victories can be attributed to a combination of top doctors, good fortune and Ryan's indomitable spirit. Vernon insists it's something else, citing the bracelet on Ryan's wrist, inscribed with two words: WALKING MIRACLE.



Vernon came to realize he knew no other way. His entire life, he believed, had prepared him for this crisis. “God,” he said one night in the darkness, “I’M ALL IN.”

Ryan reached myriad milestones during his first months of recovery. His father watched as Ryan was named to the Pro Bowl in 2017 . . . as he leaned on his fiancée to reach the podium at the NFL draft the next spring . . . as he went back into the gym . . . moved back into his house . . . added a goldendoodle puppy named Shay, short for Shalieve. Last summer Ryan married Michelle, and they announced the impending birth of their first child together. (Ryan has a son, R.J., from a previous relationship.) His father performed the wedding ceremony with wet eyes, and when he watched his oldest boy dance with his wife, he had to walk outside and compose himself again. Last January, Michelle gave birth to a boy, Lyon Carter. And four months later, Ryan pulled off a box jump that went viral.

THIS FALL the pastor watched his son go back to school, enrolling at Pittsburgh to finish the degree he started at Ohio State. Ryan is studying psychology, just like his dad once did. The more the son improved, the more the father felt rewarded for his faith.

The pastor is asked if he would have felt the same way if his son had remained paralyzed, or if the progress had happened more slowly. He says that he believes, says that he ultimately realized he has no other choice. He knows that

many will hear that and roll their eyes at his unwavering faith. But rather than consider a more cynical viewpoint, the pastor prefers to believe more deeply—and in something that can seem so delusional that whenever he raises the possibility he can see doubt on the faces staring back at him. The pastor believes that God can do more than heal Ryan, despite evidence to the contrary that is clear to anyone in the NFL and in the medical community—essentially anyone outside the Shazier family. He acknowledges it's a long shot, that it would take another miracle, but he believes Ryan could, in the most ideal world, return to a football field. “I love comeback stories,” Vernon says.

Saying it aloud prompts a million questions from a visitor. *Who would possibly hand Ryan a helmet and shoulder pads? Insure him? How can Vernon no longer watch football and still want his son to play again?* He realizes the contradictions—and surely part of him knows the reality ahead—only this time, he chooses not to reconcile what the material world cannot explain. “I would probably need an oxygen tank if the Lord allowed him to recover 100% and that boy jogged back on the field,” he says. Then he starts rolling, segueing back into gun violence and church shootings and his wish for a more empathetic world. He's preaching now. His faith, he proclaims, has always been rewarded. ffl