

## **REMARKS BY BRETT HARRIS AT THE NATIONAL BIBLE BEE 2009**

In fifteen minutes you'll know whether you're still competing tomorrow. In fifteen hours you'll know whether you've made it into the final round. In fifteen days you'll probably just be starting to recover from the last several months. In fifteen years no one will remember how you did here. And no one but *you* will remember your fourth error on that passage from Colossians in semi-finals.

But if you ask the organizers of this event what matters the most to them, they'll tell you that it's not what happens in fifteen minutes or fifteen hours. It's not about what happens here at the Marriott Hotel in Washington, D.C. The National Bible Bee is not about the National Bible Bee — it's about the Bible: God's Word. It's about what happens fifteen days, fifteen years from now as you take what you have learned this past summer and you let it change you and change others.

Organizing competitions and awarding cash prizes is one way to trick all of you into doing your best at something that really matters — but making it into finals and winning prizes is not why you are here. The only thing of lasting value anyone will take away from this event is the Bible. And this event was created to help young people around the country “Learn It, Speak It, and Live It.”

Some of you might be surprised to know that making it to nationals — even winning first place — only counts for a small fraction of your final score. Your final placement is decided by a much bigger and more important competition which starts on Saturday when you no longer have any prize to compete for except the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

For 240 of you, this biggest and most important competition will begin in fifteen minutes when you discover that you are not one of the sixty competitors moving on to semi-finals. While they continue to demonstrate how well they have learned the Bible, you will all be asked to demonstrate how well you can speak it to

yourself and others to encourage each other — and how well you can live it as you rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

Getting here to Nationals means that all of you have done an excellent job at the “Learning” stage of this competition — and no matter how far you go in this competition that stage ends at 10PM tomorrow. Some of you will be too old to compete next year. You may never have another chance to focus so exclusively on “Learning” God’s Word. Nevertheless, “Speaking” and “Living” what you’ve learned should dominate the rest of your life.

The closest thing Alex and I have ever done to this is competing in an event called Impromptu Apologetics in speech competition in high school. Instead of memorizing verses we studied how to answer over 100 questions about the Existence and Nature of God, the Scriptures, the Nature, Purpose, and Destiny of Man, the Message of Salvation, and the Person of Jesus Christ.

Back when we competed you would walk into a round and draw three slips of paper with a question each of them from an envelope, choose one of the questions, and then have three minutes to prepare a six minute speech.

Topics would be things such as, “Explain the meaning and significance of the omniscience of God,” “If man is inherently sinful, why do most men lead relatively good lives?” or “Analyze and respond to the statement: ‘It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.’”

Just as I am sure competing in the National Bible Bee has been and will be a turning point in your life — competing in Apologetics was a turning point for me. I still remember the day I start researching bible verses and cracked open Wayne Grudem’s Systematic Theology for the first time. I still remember my first round when I was sure I was going to throw up and pass out — and wasn’t sure which would happen first. At fifteen-years-old, God used it to help me own my own faith,

to really know what I believe and why. What I learned through two years of competition has continued to serve me ever since — whether I'm witnessing to the person next to me on an airplane or sharing the gospel with a crowd of people at my church's "Movies in the Park" outreach over the summer.

But I don't think Impromptu Apologetics would have had this impact on me if I hadn't learned the importance of not separating head knowledge from heart reality. I was talking with a friend one night after a tournament. He was a seminary student and had helped judge. He was telling me that he was so impressed with all the competitors. He couldn't believe that there were twelve year olds who understood propitiation!

But then he said something that really impacted me. He said, "The students I saw were very good at explaining the meaning of the ideas, but very few did a good job explaining their significance." Even though he hadn't seen me compete — I knew that his observation was true about me as well.

Here's what you have to understand. That was terrifying to me — not on a competitive level — it was terrifying on a spiritual level. Because it meant that I was gaining great amounts of head knowledge about God, but I wasn't clear on why it mattered.

You can copy a definition from Grudem's Systematic Theology – but to explain why something matters requires meditation and hiding that truth in your heart. I realized that I needed to hide those truths in my heart so that I could rejoice in God's sovereignty — not just because I drew it from an envelope — but because I believed it and treasured it — even when I didn't make it to out rounds, or when my niece was born with a congenital heart defect and only lived two months.

But what happens when you are relying on head knowledge only? In Impromptu Apologetics it sounds like this. You would be asked to explain the meaning and

significance of God's omnipresence — and would essentially say something like: *God's omnipresence means that He is everywhere, and that is significant because it means that He is everywhere.*

But why does it matter when you're all alone and you're afraid? Or you're all alone and you are tempted to sin because you think no one is watching you — but then you remember, "God is always with me. I wouldn't do this if my mom were watching me. Why I am willing to do it when I know God is watching me?"

This was a breakthrough for me. Learning to focus not only on what God's Word says, but also what it means and why it matters, was what made my time in Impromptu Apologetics one of the most life-changing and soul-shaping experiences of my life. But it also convinced me that Apologetics is incredibly dangerous when you don't learn that lesson. It is why I believe that competing in the National Bible Bee is also dangerous if you don't learn the same lesson.

That is the lesson I am here to share with you this evening.

Here's what scares me about this event. Some of you would be satisfied to walk away from this competition with a giant check and nothing more. Some of you will excel at learning God's Word — but be disqualified when it comes to speaking and living it. Some of you could be like the Pharisees — who also knew a lot about the Bible, but missed the Savior. And so I plead with you, competitors and parents: Don't be content with head knowledge separated from a heart that genuinely loves God's Word and loves the Living Word, Jesus Christ.

I believe I am up here on stage tonight to say one thing. It is an uncomfortable fact that must not be ignored. It is important because what is at stake this week is far more serious than a quarter-million dollars in cash prizes. It may shock you and it may shock the organizers — but I think they will agree with me. Here it is:

You could win the National Bible Bee and still go to Hell.

You could know the Bible better than any other young person in the country and still not know the Savior. It is possible to grow up in a Christian home; go to a top-notch Christian college; or even pastor a successful church; and still be lost in sin. Our churches will always be filled with hypocrites until we recognize that doing Christian things (even doing them really well) does not make us Christians. Knowing the Bible (even winning this competition) does not save you.

But what does save you? Romans 10:9-10 says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” And 1 John 5:4-5 tells us, “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

Thorough knowledge of Scripture is useless if it is not accompanied by this believing heart of faith. It is worse than useless — it does positive harm. You are not hiding God’s Word in your heart if you do not truly have a heart for God’s Word. Instead, you are hiding God’s Word in your head — and purely head knowledge when it comes to the Bible is dangerous to your soul. Here’s why: First, because it will puff you up with pride. Second, because it will give you a false sense of spirituality. And third, because it will desensitize you to God’s truth.

Think of it this way. The same sun that nourishes a living and healthy tree — causes it to grow, causes it to bear fruit — will wither and harden a dead or unhealthy tree and prepare it for burning. The same sun. The same Bible verses.

In other words, be concerned if this is just an academic exercise or sport for you — and if you can take in all of these rich biblical truths without being changed by

them. Be concerned if you are learning the Bible, but not speaking and living it. It could be that you are a dead tree — and no amount of biblical head knowledge will help until you have been made alive in your heart. The good news is that God promises to give a new heart to whosoever believeth in His Son Jesus Christ. And that promise is true right now and forever. You need only to ask.

Some people might think it's strange that I am sharing the Gospel at the National Bible Bee. I mean if there was anywhere you could just assume that everyone is a Christian it would be at the National Bible Bee. But that's exactly why I'm talking to you this way — because some of you might slide all the way into Hell on that assumption. Because if I didn't say this you might stand before the Lord someday and say, "God, look at all the Bible verses I memorized" — rather than, "God, I have trusted in Your Son and His sacrifice on the Cross." Because, in all honesty, this could be the last time you ever hear the Gospel — or the last time I ever get to preach it. I can't risk either of us losing that chance just for the sake of coming up here and being funny and goofy like I normally am.

What I'm ultimately saying is that nothing you accomplish without Christ is worth anything. But the opposite is also true. If you love the Savior, then this Bible Bee is one of the best things you could possibly be doing with your time. This event will be a success if you can walk away with Philippians 3:13-14 on your tongue: "But one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." That is the only prize that matters this week. And no other prize does.