

The Best Part Never Changes

Many years ago, a small nine-year-old girl dressed in a khaki skirt and a mustard-yellow polo toddled out onto stage at the 2014 National Bible Bee Competition (NBBC). The crowd erupted in applause. Cameras flashed. Motherly volunteers guided each child to his place on the magnificent stairway leading down from the stage. There, contestants posed for photos, their heavy golden medals glimmering in the bright stage lights. *This is the most incredible place ever,* the little girl thought. *I have to come back.*

Eight National Bible Bee Competitions later, the same girl waited at the base of another set of stairs, this time tucked away in the shadows. A young man—likely himself a former competitor—quietly directed the long line of contestants. “You’ll be third on stage,” he told the girl, who nodded. “ANNA NORTH CUTT,” the announcer called. Pleasantly surprised at the wave of applause that greeted her name, the girl ascended the last few steps and, once again, stood beside her fellow contestants, joining the crowd in their applauding as each new name was called. *Even after so many years, this never gets old,* she thought. *I can’t believe I’m never coming back.*

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Although I graduated high school in the spring of 2023, by the grace of God, I qualified for the NBBC, which would take place that coming fall. In order to take advantage of my last year of eligibility, I decided to postpone college until the following year. Unfortunately, the college application process overlapped with my preparation for the NBBC. By the time November rolled around, I knew I would not be advancing to the Semi-Final or Final Round of the competition. The Opening Ceremony—where contestants are recognized simply for reaching the national level—would be my last time on an NBBC stage.

All too soon, the moment was over. I returned to my seat with a heavy heart. I did not expect to be so sad, but, at the same time, it was never about the Opening Ceremony. The end of the ceremony simply marked the beginning of my journey as a Bible Bee alumna. While there would be plenty of opportunities for continued involvement, I knew it would be a completely different experience from being a contestant, and I balked at the thought of such change.

My mind wandered back to the young man I had spoken with earlier that day. He had successfully juggled a full-time job with rigorous NBBC preparation. Another friend of mine had started her second year at college while studying just as hard for her last year in Bible Bee. *They've earned their alumnship*, I thought. *They can retire from the competition knowing they gave it their best. I really wish I could say the same.*

Suddenly, God directed my attention to something that snapped me right out of my pity party. An alumnus who had been guiding contestants back to their seats was now going around passing out high-fives, beaming with such joy that, had he not been wearing the alumni staff vest, I surely would have thought he himself had just walked across stage and received a medal.

This alumnus, instead of focusing on himself, celebrated the accomplishments of others and, in doing so, shared in their joy. More importantly, however, I think he understood that what the NBBC attempts to recognize and reward with cameras and medals and prize money is an achievement that no one can put a price on and yet all can attain at any time: hundreds of hours spent in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the God of the universe and His eternal Word. The best part of the NBBC never changes.

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Despite thirty-hour work weeks at Chick-fil-A, Caleb Urdaneta went on to become the 2023 NBBC Senior Champion. When he was proclaimed the winner, my friends and I celebrated

by drowning out the rest of the announcer's speech with our cheers and mobbing Caleb the second he descended from the stage. When asked to share a few words in light of his victory, however, Caleb chose to re-direct our attention.

“This has been a dream for a long time to be a champion, but, as time has gone by, God has shown me that this isn't really what it's about. This isn't nearly as exciting as I thought it would be, because it's not the end goal,” Caleb explained. “The end goal is, as [the apostle] Paul says, knowing Christ and being found in Him. That's my goal. And that's my goal for everyone—that they would know Him as well, and that's why I'm here, proclaiming His Word. Not so you can see me, but so you can see Christ.”