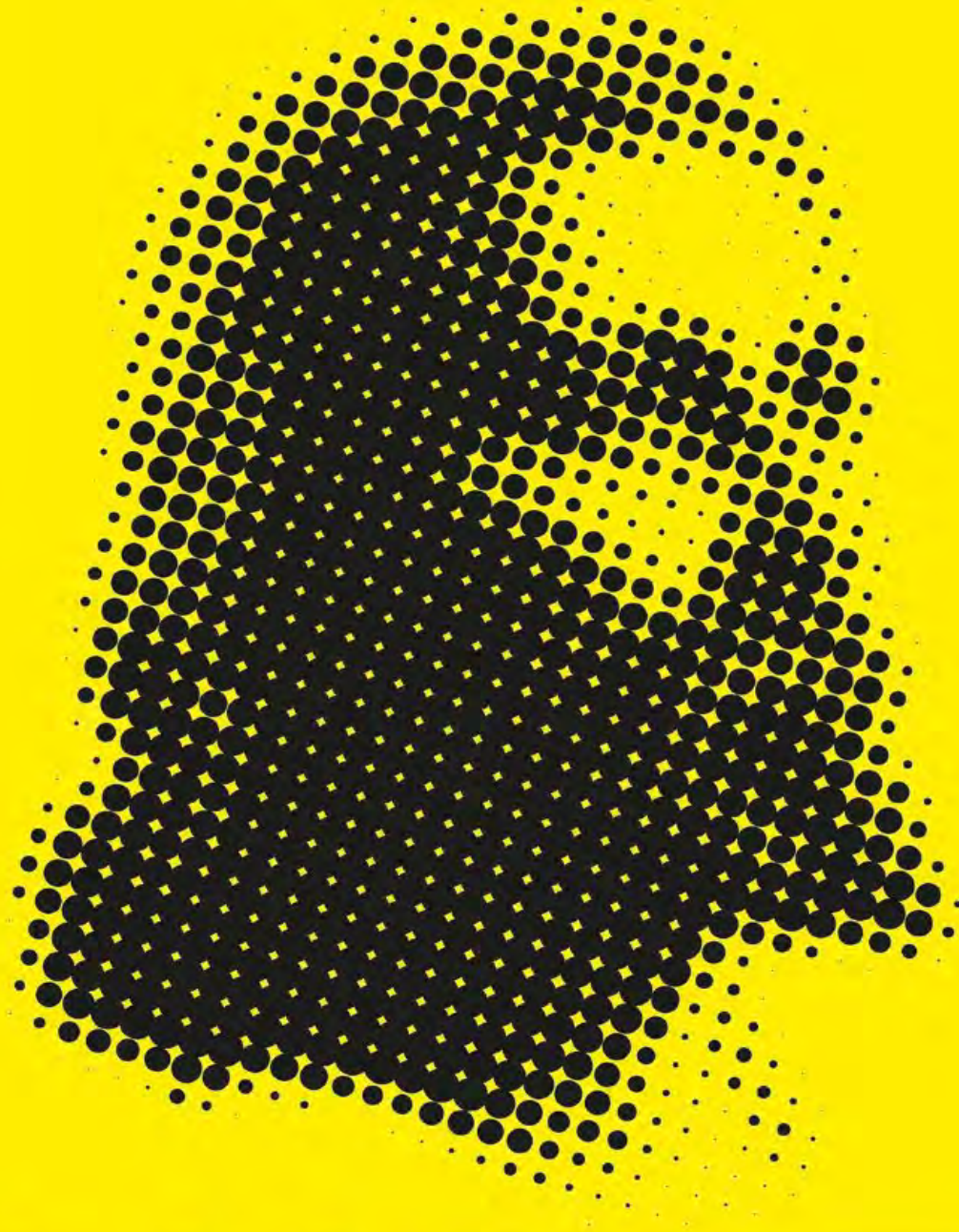


"*I Hope* is Nathan Brown at his prophetic-voice best, a call to Jesus-centred Adventism. I hope we can become the kind of church he urges us to be."

—Bruce Manners, author, *Reckless Love*



# IHOPE

Nathan Brown

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“For more than a decade, Nathan Brown has been putting pen to paper on behalf of the church, in the hope, as I read him, that we will think more deeply about our beliefs and practices and engage with the core of our faith—Jesus, the Messiah, and His kingdom. These reflections span a range of topics from the resurrection to the Second Coming and from contemporary literature to the devastating Victorian fires of 2009. At each turn, Brown not only says important things—sometimes critical, sometimes hopeful, always honest—he says them beautifully. You should not only read this book. You should follow its example.”—*Ryan Bell, senior pastor, Hollywood Seventh-day Adventist Church*

“One cannot read this book without being profoundly challenged, impacted and blessed. In *I Hope*, Nathan has articulated so powerfully, what a lot of us in this generation are grappling with—how to authentically live out the kingdom of God in the here and now, yet still looking forward to the coming of Jesus. It’s challenging—but he does offer suggestions for how we can go about this with hope.”—*Moe Ioane Stiles, director of Youth Ministries, Victorian Conference*

“When my friend Nathan Brown was called to be the editor of *Record*, it gave me ‘hope’ that our church still had the capacity for self reflection; that capacity to celebrate what God has entrusted to us and, more importantly, to distill the beauty of Adventist Christianity from the mounds of religious tradition, and to reposition Jesus at the nexus of our faith. *I Hope* recaptures some of the best of this project.”—*Gilbert Cangy, director of Youth Ministries, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*

“Nathan Brown continues to be one of the most provocative and challenging Adventist writers of this generation. Whether in agreement with what he writes, or in outraged disagreement—which happens from time to time—I always find the depth of his thought, the clarity of his prose, and his unquestioned commitment to the gospel refreshing. *I Hope* is no exception. I might not ‘hope’ for everything he does, but his ‘hopes’ cause me to re-examine my own.”—*Clifford Goldstein, editor, Adult Bible Study Guide, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*

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# I Hope: Introduction

You might not have noticed, but the title of this book is intentionally vague. You can read it as “I hope . . .” as in something I do and hope to share with you—or your can read it as “1 hope . . .” pointing us all to the one hope we have in Jesus.

Language can be tricky like that. But, rather than giving up in despair, we should celebrate the depth of meanings we can discover, particularly in our exploration of God, His plan for us and the world He has created. There is always more to learn and share.

Publishing anything is an act of hope. A writer puts a little bit of themselves, their experiences and their hopes into words, trusting that it will make sense to someone somewhere sometime else.

As you explore the pieces of this book, I hope you will discover some of these possibilities in relation to your faith, life, church and world—and, more importantly, that you will be challenged to discover or rediscover our great Hope in whom all our hopes find their completion.

But you probably shouldn't agree with everything in this book. We might learn more from our disagreements than those things we easily find in common. Writing and sharing these articles, editorials and stories in *Record*, *The Edge*, *Adventist Today*, Adventist News Network and other places has been a privilege and, of course, often I am “preaching” to myself first. But it is always pleasing when someone responds, even if negatively, and it is the responses I have received that have encouraged me to collect them together in this way.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to these thoughts and stories. Thank you to the various editors and team members who helped polish and bring them to publication. Thank you to the team at Signs Publishing Company who have made them look good and sent them out into the world. Thank you to the readers who give them their time and attention.

I hope this is a book about God and the life He has given us, much more than a book about me and my fumbling attempts to make sense of what little I understand about Him.

I hope you find something here that lifts you up, gives you hope and helps you understand Him more.

I hope.

*Nathan Brown*

# FAITH

## Real questions

Sometimes my job lands me in unusual places. Chasing up a story for *Signs* magazine, I found myself at an up-market, inner-city venue for a charity dinner on a cool Melbourne evening. It was almost one of those events at which the more the gentlemen put on—the big suit—the less material is used in the ladies' outfits—and the more expensive the whole ensemble becomes.

As I waited for proceedings to begin, the quiet clinking of glasses of the pre-dinner drinks punctuated the gradually-swelling conversation as more and more guests arrived.

Elegantly-dressed waiters and waitresses manoeuvred through the crowd, offering a remarkable variety of unidentifiable small food items. In the corner, a large white grand piano was being driven by a young guy who was managing to look just a little scruffy despite his obviously-expensive suit. But in spite of his efforts, only snatches of music could be heard over the greetings, introductions and ensuing conversations.

It was not a setting in which I was particularly comfortable. Dressed as I was for the cool outside, the rapidly-filling space was just a touch too warm. Attending the event by myself, I leant on a wall in the corner, only rescued from my awkward self-consciousness by a polite conversation offered by one of the event organisers. But, when he moved on, I was again left alone for a few minutes, until a newly-arrived group of young professionals introduced themselves to me and I was included in their circle.

Given the confusion of conversation now surrounding us, it was

impossible to maintain a conversation with anyone other than the person directly beside me, so I fell to talking with a young woman who, I discovered, ran her own human resources agency.

As the conversation progressed, in answer to her questions, I told her I work as a writer and editor for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I could tell this had caught her interest and she followed up quickly with two further questions. The first caught me off guard; the second only surprised me a little by the earnestness of her inquiry.

The first question was: “Do you believe it or do you just work for them?” It’s probably not such a strange question but it seems it would be a significant challenge to do a job like this without a reasonable level of commitment to the mission it embraces. Yet I think what she was really asking was, “Are you for real about that—and so is my next question worth asking?”

In a world where beliefs or causes are increasingly becoming trends, fashion accessories or mere cultural habits, it seems people are seeking genuine faith. Their first concern is not what we believe but whether our beliefs are authentic and have the potential to make a meaningful difference.

Having assured her I am an adherent as well as an employee, she launched quickly into the next: “What is special about what Seventh-day Adventists believe?”

It’s something I have thought about from time to time but not something I had been asked so directly before. So I had some responses without them being well ordered or practiced in their delivery.

I began with the emphasis that we are firstly Christian, in the best sense of the term—followers of Jesus focused on the hope He offers, with a two-sentence overview of God creating a good world, the world going wrong, God intervening to reconnect people to Himself and His plan to re-create our world. Amid the loud burble of surrounding conversations, her questions and responses prompted me on.

I progressed to “Seventh-day” and “Adventist.” She seemed interested by the gift of the Sabbath as a spiritual practice. And the hope of God’s return to set right the wrongs in the world as a motivation for working now toward that same goal as agents of God’s purposes for the world offered an



alternative view to heaven as a form of holy escapism, with which she was more familiar.

In return, I asked her about her understanding of faith. She seemed a collector of religious ideas, interested in asking similar questions of the various believers she encountered throughout her life.

We were interrupted by the doors opening for the event to begin. I said a momentary prayer for her as she disappeared through the crowd to rejoin her group. And I continued to ponder her questions, with which I had been blessed.

# “I don’t know”

One of my main efforts as a teacher has been to train people to say those (apparently difficult) words ‘we don’t know,’” commented Christian writer and long-time tutor at Oxford University, C S Lewis. Those “apparently difficult” words don’t come easily to any of us—and perhaps they are even more difficult in the mouths of people of faith.

But to admit “I don’t know” is an important spiritual discipline that we need to practise, precisely because it does not come easily. “You think that everyone should agree with your perfect knowledge,” wrote Paul. “While knowledge may make us feel important, it is love that really builds up the church. Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn’t really know very much” (1 Corinthians 8:1, 2).

To some, this might seem a denial of certainty and hope. But confessing “I don’t know” does not mean we know nothing. Admitting our imperfect knowledge, our fuzzy understanding and our stuttering explanations does not preclude us from also saying with Paul, “I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his return” (2 Timothy 1:12).

However, “I don’t know” means we do not have to force our limited knowledge and understandings to answer questions much larger than those for which they are fitted. It is an expression of intellectual, faith-filled honesty and humility that opens us to fresh possibilities of learning and living.

As Paul suggests, the more we learn, the more we discover we don’t know. But this should not be grounds for either a loss of faith, or discouragement and despair. The awesome vastness and wonder of the Word, world and ways of God are our greatest evidence of who we believe Him to be. A God merely like us, understandable by us, managed by us, is ultimately of little use to us. Instead of roadblocks to faith, the challenges of explaining God are the starting points for contemplation, worship and further exploration.

Drawing on the Jewish tradition of exploring God by intense study of

# End of product sample

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