

**Hebrews 11:8-16**  
**“I’ve got you”**

Let me take you back to my final year as an undergraduate. I won’t tell you which year, but you might be able to work it out from what I’m about to say.

A group of students assemble, eager for the introduction to the first lecture in this new module on organometallic cluster compounds. But on the screen we do not immediately see pictures of molecules. The lecturer starts by saying that he had just been to the cinema recently, and seen the new must-see film, **Superman**. Remember? “You’ll believe a man can fly!”

The start of that film took us to the distant planet of Krypton, where the baby Superman was about to be cast adrift in a spacecraft - the only hope for that race, as the planet or its society was about to disintegrate - I can’t remember those details. And so we are treated to a picture of the **spacecraft** as it leaves its doomed home-world.

And at that point, my lecturer told us, he noticed that the shape of that spacecraft was a polystellated icosahedron ... precisely the same shape as some of those **molecules** he would be introducing us to.

I only remember a few more snippets from that original film from way back. Of course, Superman, weren’t we told, was supposed to be “faster than a speeding bullet”, and there is that memory of when the growing Superlad is testing his developing abilities, and merely runs along **as fast as a speeding train**. Movie trivia: the older couple whose daughter points at young Superman as he keeps pace with that speeding train were played by the Superman and Lois Lane actor and actress from way further back, the original movie serials and radio show.

That girl in the train was supposed to be a younger Lois Lane, too, whom Clark Kent was to meet later ... oh, and save, of course. Fast forward a decade or so, to when Clark Kent is a reporter on the **Daily Planet**, and an also older Lois Lane suffers what you could perhaps describe as a helicopter mishap.

You might remember this snippet from the film, too. Why the helicopter plunged onto the top of that skyscraper, I don’t really know, but there is Lois, **dangling one-handed** from the helicopter runner over the top edge of the building, with nothing but air between her and the (sorry, Americanism!) sidewalk some thousand feet below.

And Clark Kent, with his secret super-vision, spies her predicament from ground level, quickly goes for his now famous **twirl** not in a phone booth, but a rotating door, to emerge for the first time as the superhero himself. And not a moment too soon. Lois’ grip finally gives way, and she **starts to fall** to her inevitable death ... only to be **caught in mid-air**.

Remember the dialogue at that point? “Easy, Miss, **I’ve got you**”. And her reply: “**You’ve got me?! Who’s got you?**”

Very, very good question, not just for the fictitious potential couple, but for life generally. How come this guy in the blue spandex can stay suspended in mid-air, totally contrary to our normal understanding of human aerodynamics? Normally, something needs to be supported by something else that is stable. Yes, you can have an amazing tower of bricks (think **Jenga**), or those **wind sculptures** in the Wild West but, no matter how precarious it might appear, it all rests on a secure foundation. Or it eventually **tumbles**.

So what kind of foundation would you say that *you* have for your life? If someone were to ask you Lois Lane's question, *Who's got you?...* what would your answer be? How well-founded is your foundation?

You might think immediately of that little word picture that Jesus gave, at the end of what we call his "Sermon on the Mount". Foundations feature very heavily - or, in one case, not heavily enough - in that little story. First, a house *with* a foundation:

***"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock."***

(Matthew 7:24-25)

And then the opposite, as the dramatic finale to his Sermon drives the point home rivetingly:

***"And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."***

(Matthew 7:26-27)

We shouldn't be able to miss the take-home message. What's the contrast? It depends on what we do with **the words of Jesus**. Not just hear them, but do them, or not do them. That's the difference.

But today I'd like to take us way further back in the Bible, to Abraham, where we will find a similar insistence on the need for foundations for life. And yet, not back to Genesis, where we see the account of Abraham laid out, but in the NT book we call *Hebrews*, and a chapter that sometimes gets called "**The Gallery of the Faithful**".

I think it makes sense to take the traditional understanding of this book, that it's written to disciples of Jesus Christ in a society which was starting to become less favourable to them. The ultimate levels of persecution have not yet kicked in:

***In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.***

(Hebrews 12:4)

But things are definitely getting uncomfortable for the followers of Jesus. So why not, the temptation would be, get back to the Jewish roots of that faith? Why not slip back into the calmer waters of the Jewish religion, that was officially tolerated by the Roman state, and afforded protections that this new group naming the name of Jesus had not been granted?

So the writer of this letter, time and time again, insists that there is actually clear water between Judaism and - I think I'd prefer to call it "faith in Christ", rather than simply "Christianity". And Jesus is *better*, on every score. He is superior to angels, he is a better high priest than Aaron, his sacrifice of himself is better than all the millions of animals whose blood was shed in the temple at Jerusalem. By this point in the letter we've had 10 chapters of those "betters" stacked up. Oh, and a not totally trivial further point to consider, too:

***In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.***

(Hebrews 8:13)

That's probably looking forward only a very few months or years to when the Jewish temple is blitzed by the Romans. So our question today, **Who's got you?** is really pertinent. Judaism is like a **lifeboat with holes**. It's not a safe place to hide. It will shortly sink! There is no safe foundation to be had there.

But, throughout its history, Judaism has featured people of *faith*. It had become a system of mere religion and ritual, but what was it really all about? And it turns out that it was never really intended to be all about outward rituals. It has always been, at its heart, something about faith in the True and Living God. And *that* is what the writer highlights for us in this chapter 11.

***Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation.***

(Hebrews 11:1-2)

That was always how it worked, right from the start. Abel, Enoch, Noah, people like that, right back in those earliest chapters of the Bible, they were people of *faith*. Here's what it says about Noah, for example:

***... he ... became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.***

(Hebrews 11:7)

And Abraham, the next one in chronological order, him too. What did he do? What kind of practical faith in the True and Living God did he show?

***By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.***

(Hebrews 11:8)

You can totally understand Lois Lane's comment there, can't you? **Who's got you?** There is no obvious security or foundation there. He starts as probably a reasonably well-to-do resident of Ur, and he gives it all up. Maybe sells it all up, to fund this expedition into ... well, the middle of nowhere, really. Imagine people asking him what he's up to, and where is he going? How are they going to react to his answer, *Well, I don't know, really. Hopefully I'll know when I get there?*

What *did* he have, though? Was it just wishful thinking? I think we need to read on, and see that there is some kind of *promise* involved - the word comes up twice in this verse, and a few times more soon afterwards, too:

***By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.***

(Hebrews 11:9)

So first of all it was the right land, but at the wrong time. It was going to be something like 500 years later when Abraham's descendants would finally receive that land. And actually at this earlier point, descendants was a very live issue for him. He and his wife were old and childless. It was impossible ... surely? But ...

***By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.***

(Hebrews 11:11)

Look, there's that *promise* word again, as well as the little phrase "by faith".

So, it's because of the promise ... or is it? Perhaps we should be a bit picky here. It wasn't just because Abraham and Sarah had been given a promise, but because of who it was that was giving the promise. Come back to our **mid-air Super-clinch** again.

If it was anyone else saying, "Easy, Miss, I've got you", it would be worthless. ***But who's got you?*** would be precisely the right answer. See, a promise is only as good as the person who makes it. Would you buy a used car from **this man**? But if it is Superman in the film, Lois is safe. And if it is *God* saying "Descendants" and "Homeland" to Abraham and Sarah, they're on safe ground.

It's not a very flattering description we read here about Abraham's potential as the head of a new people, but it's accurate. And it's amazing:

***Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.***

(Hebrews 11:12)

Now when I said that in believing God's promise, Abraham and Sarah are "on safe ground", did you notice that I was deliberately using there the concept of foundations in the metaphor that I chose? And Hebrews uses the word *foundations*, too:

***For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.***

(Hebrews 11:10)

Because this is the True and Living God we're talking about, his words bear infinite weight. His words are infinitely dependable. They are a foundation upon which we can build, and upon which we can risk *everything*.

But actually, doesn't it look as if Abraham is looking there for more than simply the fulfilment of God's promise about descendants and a literal, earthly homeland? What's this *city* that we're reading about? A city of total security, surely, if *God himself* has planned not just its architecture but also its foundations. So what's that? We have to read on again.

First, there's a summary, just a note - if we even needed one, but just stating it for the record - that Abraham and Sarah never saw the fulfilment of that promise. But they *acted* upon that promise. And their attitude to life was changed by it.

***These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.***

(Hebrews 11:13)

Not strangers in the sense of wanting to go *back* home, to Ur, and family. That still remained as a possibility, but it was one that they did *not* choose.

***For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.***

(Hebrews 11:14-15)

Not at all. They are actually looking for something out of this world.

***But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.***

(Hebrews 11:16)

But even now, though that's a wonderful desire, it's not necessarily just open to us, is it? They can only hope for this because God has given this promise. An invitation has been issued. And this next line I find really moving. It is not a grudging invitation at all. It is the very opposite of grudging. It is gracious, amazingly gracious.

***Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.***

(Hebrews 11:16)

We are called as guests. We do not need to build this city ourselves. It is always that way with this True and Living God. He gives to us.

***“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”***

(Romans 11:35)

Don't ever think that you come here - and by "here" I mean like this on Zoom, or when we hopefully finally get back into some physical location to meet ... don't think that when you come here, you are doing God some kind of favour.

He has not invited you to this city in order to boost his prestige by having such fine fellows and fellowesses as ourselves as residents.

He does not need your name or its following letters to dignify the executive of this church.

He does not need to strike a deal with the returning prodigal to take him on as a member of his staff:

***“I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.””***

(Luke 15:18-19)

No, this gracious God is insistent that you will be again a member not of his staff, but of his family:

***“Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”***

(Luke 15:22-24)

And that celebratory party, in that heavenly city, is something that God himself insists he will be delighted to attend.

***“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”***

(Luke 15:10)

***Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.***

(Hebrews 11:16)

That was God's promise and invitation to Abraham, which Abraham responded to ... as did all of those people of Hebrews 11 ... "by faith".

That is the promise and invitation to all of you, too, to come *by faith* in Jesus Christ.

And if you're not really sure enough of yourself that you could think to claim that you have, by faith, come to know this True and Living God, let me finish with a verse that I've always found encouraging in those self-doubtful moments. Just as it isn't about *us* bringing to God, but *God* preparing for us, so it is with "knowing God":

***But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, ...***

(Galatians 4:9)

The emphasis is the other way around, to *be known by* God.

Those Hebrews receiving the letter were encouraged by this description of the heavenly city:

***But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.***

(Hebrews 12:22-24)

If you have put your trust in Jesus Christ, *you* are part of that **you**. Or, if that seems a bit heavy-duty for the end of a sermon, think back to Lois Lane, held secure in the arms of Superman, still a hundred or so feet above the sidewalks of Metropolis, but with the question ***Who's got you?*** now safely answered.