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Session 29 – Hebrews, James

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Welcome to the Explainer. So, today we're jumping headfirst into a debate that's been around for, oh, about 2,000 years. It's a massive question that seems to pit two of the most important figures in the New Testament against each other.

Are we saved by what we believe or by what we do? Okay, let's just get right to it with this one sentence. It's been a theological lightning rod for centuries. The author, James, comes right out and says that a person is justified, you know, made right with God by their works and not by faith alone.

And for a lot of people, that is a huge, huge problem. Because right away, you can feel the tension, can't you? It seems to set up this major contradiction right at the heart of Christian Scripture. I mean, how can that be true when so much of the New Testament seems to hammer home the exact opposite idea? And believe me, this isn't some newfangled debate we just came up with.

No, this is a conflict with a long, fiery history, one that really exploded during the Protestant Reformation. I mean, just look at this. It lays the problem out in black and white.

You've got the Apostle Paul on one side, writing in Galatians that a person is justified not by works. And then, bam, on the other side, you have James saying a person is justified by works. It just doesn't get more opposite than that.

And this wasn't just some friendly theological squabble. For Martin Luther, you know, the father of the Protestant Reformation, this was a massive deal. His entire movement was built on this idea of justification by faith alone.

He was so bothered by what James wrote that he actually called it an epistle of straw, basically saying it didn't have the real substance of the gospel. So what's the deal here? Is it a flat-out contradiction? Was Luther right? Or is there something we're all missing? To solve this puzzle, we have to do what any good investigator does. We have to look at the context.

And that means starting with the man who wrote the letter. So who was this guy, James? Because understanding the author here is our first big clue. And his identity gives his words some incredible weight.

Okay, so this is huge. The guy writing this letter wasn't just some random follower. The overwhelming historical tradition tells us this was James, the actual brother of Jesus.

Yeah, that James. He was also a pillar, a key leader in the early church back in Jerusalem. Basically, when he talked, people paid attention.

His authority was immense. Okay, so we know who wrote it, but just as important is who he was writing to. The audience? Well, that changes everything.

James starts his letter by addressing the twelve tribes in the dispersion. Now, that's not just some poetic phrase. It was a very specific term for Jewish Christians who had been scattered, you know, dispersed, all over the Roman Empire, far away from their home and the religious center in Jerusalem.

And you have to understand, life for them was, well, it was tough. Really tough. Think about it.

You're living as a minority group. You're facing extreme poverty. You're often getting exploited by rich landowners, and you're totally separated from your homeland.

And that context, that real-world struggle, it completely changes how we should read his message. See, James isn't writing some abstract theological paper for a seminary. He's sending out urgent, practical advice to a community that's just trying to survive.

His whole message is intensely practical. He's talking about how to endure through all those trials, how to be generous, even when you have next to nothing yourself, and how to have wisdom in how you speak and act. It's all about a faith that can actually hold up under real-world pressure.

And here is the absolute key. When James talks about works, he's not talking about following a bunch of religious rules to try and earn your way to heaven. No way.

He's talking about real, tangible acts of compassion. You know, like caring for orphans and widows, the most vulnerable people in their society. So for James, it's pretty simple.

A faith that doesn't lead to action, a faith that sees a brother or sister in need and does nothing, well, that's not really faith at all. He literally calls it a dead faith. So the works aren't what saves you.

They're the proof, the evidence that you have been saved. Okay, so now that we have all that context, the pieces of the puzzle really start to fit together, don't they? And that huge contradiction, well, it starts to melt away. Here's the big reveal.

Paul and James weren't arguing with each other at all. They were like two different doctors treating two different diseases. They weren't writing to correct each other.

They were writing to help their own communities with their own unique problems. So look at this. Paul was fighting against legalism, that toxic idea that you can follow enough rules to make God love you.

And his answer was a resounding, no, you're saved by faith alone. But James, he was fighting something totally different. Hypocrisy, the empty idea that you can say, I have faith, but then do nothing to help anyone.

And his answer was, no, a faith without works is dead. So when you put it all together, it's not a contradiction. It's complementary.

It's two sides of the same coin. Paul and James together give us this incredible, complete picture of what real faith looks like. It's a gift you receive freely.

And then that gift completely transforms you from the inside out into someone who lives a life of active love and compassion. And that leaves us with a pretty challenging question, doesn't it? It takes this ancient debate and makes it incredibly personal. So if true faith is the tree and good works are the fruit that naturally grows on it, what does your tree look like?