Session 1: James 1:1–12

OPEN

What's the best food you prepare? (Or, for some, what's the only food you prepare?)

What are the ingredients? How do you prepare it? Can you bring some next week?

Leader: *Yes, this is just a casual icebreaker question, but it ties into a point Francis Chan will make in the video. So listen for some details that you can refer back to later.*

READ

Read James 1:1–12.

Leader: *Here in the first session, it's best to read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 1: *James 1:1–12* (8 minutes).

DISCUSS

According to verse 1, who was the author of this letter?

Who was James? How does he describe himself?

According to tradition, this James was also the half-brother of Jesus, a son of Joseph and Mary. (NOTE: Roman Catholic teaching maintains that James was a cousin of Jesus.)

GO DEEPER

Learn more about James in the following set of Bible verses:
Mark 6:3; John 7:3–5; Acts 1:14; Acts 15:13; Galatians 1:19; 2:9

How did James and the other brothers feel about Jesus' ministry at first? What changed?

How was James regarded in the early church?

NOTE: James, the brother of John, was executed rather early in the church's history (Acts 12:2), so he wasn't the James who emerged as a church leader.

Why do you think James didn't introduce himself as the brother of Jesus? Wouldn't it help to say, "I know what I'm talking about, because I knew Jesus like a brother—in fact, I am His brother"?

Many possibilities here. Perhaps he was being humble, emphasizing his servanthood. Perhaps everyone already knew who he was. Perhaps he was a controversial figure and he wanted to keep the focus on the Lord.

According to verse 1, who are the recipients of this letter?

What does that mean? Why does James say it that way?

"Twelve tribes" reflects language that points back to Israel, which originally had twelve tribes—each tracing their lineage back to one of the twelve sons of Jacob. The twelve tribes are used throughout Scripture to symbolize the fullness of God's people. We see this picture carried on in the New Testament as Jesus chose twelve disciples—a clear reflection of the twelve tribes of Israel (See Matt. 19:28). In the book of Revelation the apostle John uses imagery of twelve tribes to denote the fullness of the people of God, now Jew and Gentile (Rev. 7:5–8; 21:12).

Through the centuries, many Jews had emigrated from their homeland in times of exile, war, famine, or economic hardship. This is known as the diaspora, which means "scattering." The diaspora, or "Dispersion" as translated in the ESV, became a technical term for all places outside of Palestine where Jews lived. In Acts 8 we see the beginnings of a new Dispersion among Christ-followers. Persecution forced believers out of Jerusalem into Samaria, and eventually the far reaches of the Roman Empire.

So James is likely referring to Christ-followers, likely of Jewish decent, who had been scattered around the world as a result of persecution.

GO DEEPER

Learn more about “the scattered” in the following Bible verses:
Acts 1:8; Acts 2:5, 8–11; Acts 8:1

Where would the followers of Jesus be “witnesses” (Acts 1:8)?

The people converted at Pentecost (Acts 2)—where were they from?

According to Acts 8:1, what caused the Christians to leave Jerusalem?

It’s important to recognize that this letter is distinctly Jewish. Where the letters of Paul are generally written to mixed groups of Jews and Gentiles, this letter is written to an audience who is thoroughly familiar with Jewish teaching.

According to James 1:2 and the following verses, how should we react when times get tough?

Why? What is the end result of this “testing”?

Do you remember what Francis Chan said about the word “testing” in the video? What word pictures did he paint for us?

PEEK AT THE GREEK

The word for testing (*dokimion*) was often used in metallurgy. Precious metals would be smelted— tested—by putting them through extreme heat and removing impurities. Francis talked about the tested metal being so pure you could see your reflection in it. In his word-picture, it's God testing us and seeing His reflection in us. As we go through the heat, we become more like Him.

GO DEEPER

Learn more about our approach to suffering in the following Bible verses:
Matthew 5:10–12; Romans 5:3–5

As you look at these two verses, in comparison to James 1:2–4, what similarities do you find? What are the differences?

There are many fascinating connections between the Sermon on the Mount, the book of Romans, and the book of James. We'll trace some of these as we continue our study.

Francis Chan said in the video,

> What God wants to do is not just to make you happy, He wants to make you holy. He wants you to be a reflection of Him and it's the trials, the sufferings, that make us more like Christ. He says He wants us mature, complete, not lacking in anything. Have you ever thought about that as the goal of your life?

Do you think people expect God to make them happy? Is that a wrong idea?

If you made this the "goal of your life," to grow in holiness even if it meant suffering, how would that change your life? What decisions would you make differently? How would you have to adjust your priorities?
Is that a realistic idea?

Later Francis talked about the ingredients involved in baking a cake. Individually, an egg, a stick of butter, a handful of flour taste bad. But together they're delicious.

What was he saying there? What does that teach us about the sufferings we sometimes have to face?

GO DEEPER

Learn more about God's plans in our difficulties in the following Bible verses:
Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28

How do you think Joseph felt when he said this (Genesis 50:20) to his brothers, who had once kidnapped and sold him as a slave? How do you think they felt?

Do you think Romans 8:28 promises us that everything will turn out all right? Why do you think the verse mentions God's "purpose"?

LAST WORD

Leader: *This is a time for some final questions and comments, for reflection more than discussion.*

How has God been "smelting" you? Has He been burning away some impurities? Has it been a painful process? How have you been growing through that process?

James talks a bit about doubting, and sometimes it seems like He's scolding us. "Shame on you for doubting! You're unstable in all you do! You won't receive anything from the Lord!"
But maybe there's another way to approach this.

As you look at verse 6, when should you have faith and not doubt? ("When you ask.")

When you ask for what? (For wisdom.)

Why would you need wisdom?

Well, maybe because the testing of your faith leads to some tough decisions you have to make. Maybe you're facing new challenges. And maybe you're worried that you've got it all wrong, that Christianity isn't the right way. If it was the right way, then why would God let you suffer like this?

When persecution drove the Christians out into the wider world, many of them had good reason to doubt. James is urging them to come to God with their problems, and to trust in His wise guidance. He says the same to us. Don't jump in and out of your faith. Keep in touch with God through the difficulties, and He will get you through.

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Conversation: Some of us complain a lot. What if we followed James and started considering our troubles "pure joy"? Who could you contact this week—by email, phone, text, or in person—and instead of complaining, tell them about the way God is helping you grow?

Journaling: Write about your struggles. Don't hold back. Complain all you want. But then go back to your journal the next day and jot some notes in the margins about how God might be making you "mature and complete."

Memorization: Learn James 1:2–3, and maybe verse 4. This will be a powerful support to you in your toughest times. Prayer: Consider others you know who are going through difficulties. Ask God to help them grow.

Influence: Have you seen spiritual growth in someone else who has gone through trials? Tell them so.