

WHEN MY CUP OF JOY RUNS ON LOW TO EMPTY by Jack Albright

Psalms 23:5c "My cup runs over with joy."

The overflowing cup was a powerful symbol when David wrote this psalm. The hosts in the Ancient East used to send a message to guests through their glass that was kept filled, or allowed to become empty.

As long as the cup was kept full, the guest knew he was welcome. But when the cup was empty, the host was hinting that the hour was late.

On the occasions, however, when the host really enjoyed the company of a person, he filled the cup to overflowing. He didn't stop when the wine reached the rim; he kept pouring until the liquid ran over the edge of the cup and down onto the table. David was overwhelmed that Yahweh wanted him to stay at the table because the table before him was wet from the overflow.

A reader posed a question that deserves consideration. If the brimming cup represents God's overwhelming acceptance and love, what does it mean if our cup is running low to empty?

Are you and I in any way responsible for the fullness or the emptiness of our cup? Does our feeling of emptiness indicate that God wants us to leave his presence? Is God tired of us? I don't think so.

Even the most positive Christians experience times when we are not overflowing with the effervescence of God's presence. When our spiritual gauge of joy shows a low to empty reading, it is time for a spiritual inventory. Could the rain on our parade indicate that we are in the wrong parade?

The 23rd Psalm deals with all the highs and lows of human experience. We have followed the winding pathway where the shepherd has led his flock. They have experienced green pastures and quiet waters. They have passed through rugged valleys where there were constant threats of wild animals and frightening shadows. These experiences were so overwhelming and unsettling that they were likened to a valley filled with death. Through all the challenges of the journey they have the comforting presence of the Master Shepherd who never fails to provide for them.

Like sheep, we must accept personal responsibility for much of our lack of contentment and joy. A humorous story comes from the church setting. A woman who tried vainly to give the impression of piety and spiritual strength was at the altar praying aloud, "God, fill me with the Holy Spirit. Fill me to overflowing with your power and might.

Fill my cup with the Spirit." From somewhere in the congregation came an unidentified voice, "Don't do it Lord, she leaks."

Sincere Christians want to be filled with the Holy Spirit and know the constant presence of God. The reality is that many times we cause our own unhappiness and lack of joy. Our cup of joy, peace, contentment and assurance of God's closeness may seem to be near-empty, not because God doesn't want our presence at His table, but because we decline invitations to attend the announced banquets.

When David prayed in Psalms 51, "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation," he was repenting of grievous sins that had broken his close fellowship with God. God had not forsaken or cast David aside, but David felt an emptiness and lostness because he had disobeyed God's moral law. When he confessed his sinfulness he felt the restoration and nearness of God's presence.

The shepherd gives his life for the sheep and never deserts them.

It is always the sheep that goes astray and it is always the shepherd who faithfully restores them to his fellowship.