

*Valley Life* by Yolanda Cohen Stith  
A Journey into the Heart of God

Summary

The Christian life and coming to know God is not just learning about him but knowing him on a deeper level—a heart level, where intimacy is experienced. I believe God created us for that kind of relationship. An intimate relationship and a walk with God do not materialize from reading a book about it or even the Bible; it comes from experiencing God in our most challenging and painful moments and seasons—in the valleys of the shadow of death.

*Valley Life* is based on the scripture verse, Psalm 23:4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” Knowing that God is not simply with us, but, as a result of our co-crucifixion with Christ He is *in* us (Galatians 2:20 and Romans 6:6), which means that He is in us when we walk through those valleys of life. Jesus is everything we need. His life is sufficient to meet us at our deepest, most heartfelt pain, and what’s more, we experience his presence in the most profound and surprising ways there.

This is my personal journey with Jesus through my 40 years of life as a child of God. All the many valleys through which I’ve walked—from what led me to Jesus as a young Jewish hippie to the present—have completely transformed my life. Through every one of those valleys, God revealed to me his unfathomable grace, his unending love, and his humbling mercy. He has taught me who He is and changed me. God used my valleys and the brokenness they produced to cultivate an intimate relationship with Him. He was no longer a one-day-a-week experience for a couple of hours, an intellectual assent through a bible study, or the latest and greatest conference and retreat. He has become my very *life*, experiencing him every day, throughout my day, and not just when I need something from him.

As a pastoral counselor for the past 23 years, I have listened to other stories of valley experiences where valley girls and guys have lost their way, because they weren't able to navigate the rough terrain. Some lost their faith in God altogether, while others sank into a prolonged depression that rendered them helpless and hopeless. *Valley Life* is a book of hope, because if I can walk through "the valley of the shadow of death" with God as my strength and my hope, so can others. The circumstances in my life have been heartbreaking and not anything I ever expected, but they are what God has used to reveal his heart to me and shape me into the person I am today. For me, the valleys have been a journey to the very heart of God.

My story begins at the most difficult and painful valley in all my years: the death of my husband of 35 years. Ken was 67 years old, in great shape (still playing full-court basketball with Millennials) and perfect health—except for the incurable brain tumor that snuffed out his life. It came on the heels of a 10-year wilderness experience with our son, Benjamin, beginning when he 15 years old and ending one month before Ken's diagnosis. My son's prodigal years were, at the time, the most difficult journey to date. I went from one trauma to another, before I could catch my breath. My journey with my son through drug addiction, mental health issues, criminal activity, rehabs, boarding school, and Christian boot camp all led up to 19 months in jail and left me full of fear, anxiety, and depression. When Ken died my entire world exploded into one big, heaping mess. My whole life fell apart. I was suddenly alone and on my own. I felt completely abandoned and battle-weary, without any desire to live.

When I started picking up the pieces of my life and began the grieving process, all I could do was work. Fortunately, as a Christian counselor who has been in ministry for 23 years, work was a great opportunity for me to hear that "still small voice" of God. This truly was the "valley of the shadow of death." There would have been a

time in my Christian journey where I probably would have taken my own life, since the weight of pain and the endless days of suffering were relentless; however, God had other plans, and he always seems to get what he wants! It was what I learned in previous valleys, though, that kept me moving forward and persevering with an unwavering hope in Christ.

In the chapter entitled, “The Broken Road,” I share my story of redemption and how a 24-year-old Jewish girl from “The Valley” in Los Angeles meets Jesus the Jewish Messiah in a head-on collision. This Jesus, in whom she was taught not to believe (and certainly stay away from the *goyim* who proselytized), ended up being the Jewish Messiah. My parents were less than excited. Many years later, I was blessed to be able to lead both my Mom and Dad to the Lord, and they are with him today.

*Valley Life* is for every Christian who has been beaten up, pulled down, and dragged through the mud of this fallen world, who are tired and weary, and who have lost confidence in their ability to cope. I’m sure there are people who have struggled more and endured more, and others who seem to go through life without being singed by such losses, but *no one* escapes altogether. No matter what circumstances that one encounters in this life, the valley can be a place of hope—a journey into the heart of God.