

## 243 Slowing Down: Come away and rest with Alyson Pryor

In a world that glorifies the grind and celebrates being “crazy busy,” today’s conversation feels like a breath of fresh air. We’re talking about the lost art of retreat—not the kind that requires expensive getaways or weeks away from responsibility, but the accessible, transformative practice of creating space for silence, solitude and intentional rest right where you are.



This conversation is part of our special “Slowing Down” series here on The Do Gooders Podcast. As summer winds down and we feel that familiar pull toward fall’s packed schedules, we’re exploring a different idea: that slowing down isn’t about doing less good in the world, but about doing good in a way that’s sustainable, joyful and rooted in the rhythms God designed for human flourishing.

Our guest today is Alyson Pryor, and she brings a unique perspective to this conversation. As both a trained marriage and family therapist and a certified spiritual director, Alyson understands the human need for rest from both psychological and spiritual angles. She holds degrees in psychology from USC and Fuller Seminary, plus a Master’s in Spiritual Formation and Soul Care from Talbot Seminary. Currently, she serves as a staff spiritual director and adjunct faculty member at Biola University, where she guides future ministry leaders in developing sustainable spiritual rhythms.

Alyson’s upcoming book, [“Come Away and Rest: A Guide to Personal Spiritual Retreats,”](#) offers something we all desperately need—practical, step-by-step guidance for creating six different types of personal retreats that can be practiced anywhere. The title comes from Jesus’ invitation to his disciples in Mark 6:31: “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.”

Whether you’re a ministry leader feeling the weight of constant availability, a parent juggling endless responsibilities, or simply someone who knows you need to slow down but doesn’t know how to start, this conversation will meet you where you are. We’re going to explore why retreat isn’t selfish but essential, how to overcome the barriers that keep us rushing, and what it actually looks like to step away in order to step back in with renewed purpose and presence.

So take a deep breath, and listen in for more on how to accept Jesus’ gentle invitation to come away and rest.

**Show highlights include:**

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- Why retreat is essential, not selfish, for followers of Jesus
- How a weekly practice of Sabbath opened Alyson to deeper rest
- The difference between tuning out and tuning in during downtime
- Six models of personal retreats—from rest to grief to discernment
- Why solitude is essential, even when Sabbath is practiced in community
- How retreat equips us to re-enter community with greater presence and love
- A practical first step for anyone who doesn't know where to begin

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**Christin Thieme:** Can you share a moment when you first experienced what it was like or that transformational effect of actually slowing down?

**Alyson Pryor:** Yeah, I mean I tell this in the introduction to the book, but I sensed the call to really take seriously the invitation to Sabbath. When I had, I think maybe I had four out of my five kids and we ended up having five kids in nine years and somewhere along there close to the end of that run, I really hit some walls within myself, obviously, coming up again against my own fatigue and burnout. My husband actually is a captain in the fire service, so he works long stretches at a time. So yeah, it was really prevalent to me that I was burned out and exhausted. And so my practice of retreating actually came out of a weekly practice of Sabbath, of just kind of taking God at His word that He has rest for us and that He delights in us when we rest, and that we can actually... He can do more when we rest. He can accomplish more in our ceasing than we can do in our just endless striving.

Yeah, so I would say that that's probably the epicenter of what propelled this book forward, but then also just my own story of really meeting God in the place of saying, in Your word it says that You desire rest for us. Jesus said, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, I'll give you rest." And so it was sort of this tension of I want to take this seriously and I don't know how it can possibly work with all these young kids and a husband who's gone many Sundays. And for me, the beauty was seeing how God really tangibly met me in that tension and really made a way for rest and really made a way for me to connect with Him, not just zoning out, which was kind how it started, be kind of gravitating to if I had 10 minutes or an hour when the kids were sleeping or whatever, I would gravitate to what most people do, which is I go to Target and just mindlessly put things in my cart, or I would go to Netflix and just see what's in my queue or Amazon or whatever. And so this was a real shift for me of what might it mean to tune in to God in these moments of rest instead of just tuning out from what is stressful.

**Christin Thieme:** That's an interesting point. I know your book is still forthcoming and we want to get it into everybody's hands and help readers practice these retreats from anywhere, but that's an interesting point you make about tuning in versus tuning out, especially in our hyperconnected always available, always on culture. How do you make that distinction or how realistic is it for people to really

disconnect and find that solitude?

**Alyson Pryor:** I think it's very realistic. I think it comes out of a place of surrender and trust and curiosity, which is how it happened for me, was Your word says this, but this doesn't make any sense because I still have to cook and clean and keep these people alive and make it make sense. I don't get what it means. And for me, it was that heart posture of being willing and open to rest when God would give it. And so for me, that was the tuning in, the tuning into "Here I am God, I open myself to you. I am welcoming rest when it comes and when you have it for me." And so that I was able to have eyes to see pockets of time when it did come, that made me more conscious of practicing things that would be actually restful to my soul as opposed to just numbing or distracting myself.

And the language that I use for tuning in is actually from, I can't remember his name, Rocco Errico, he wrote a book on the Aramaic word for prayer, which is T-S-L-A. We don't really have a, I mean I could try to pronounce it but it would sound stupid, but the Hebrew essentially, tsla, is he said, "If you want to use the Aramaic word for prayer, you actually have to use the same word for tuning a radio. So it's very much a posture of tuning to the right frequency when we pray." And he said it's also a posture of opening that it's the same word in Aramaic as just set a trap. So it's the idea of going out a hunter/gatherer society where the people who Jesus was speaking to and farmers in agriculture, and they would understand that the word for set a trap is that same posture of being open and waiting for God when He passes by and being willing to receive rest when it comes as opposed to just distracting ourselves and numbing and tuning out.

**Christin Thieme:** You write about six different types of personal retreats. Can you share a little bit about what those different approaches are and why the variety matters?

**Alyson Pryor:** Yeah, so those actually came out of very personal interactions with my directives. So my main work is writing, but also I'm a spiritual director. And for anyone who's unfamiliar with that term, it's similar to the work of therapy. So I'm also trained as a marriage and family therapist, although I don't practice right now. But it's a really similar setup in terms of you're in the room one-on-one with a person. It's confidential, it's 45 minutes. It's a very similar looking from the outside, but a spiritual director is honed in on the person's life with God. So they're journeying with another person and paying attention to how God is working in their life. So part of my work as a spiritual director is that people will come looking for rest. They will come looking for a deeper connection with Jesus, and they will often come having experienced what our culture might term retreat like a women's event or a weekend away. And they will have noticed that although those things were life-giving, in many ways they didn't satisfy that deeper weariness.

And so I've had several people who will come for spiritual direction, aware of a need for rest, and sometimes they will have a conception of Sabbath or retreat or a real variety of ways in which they have tried to get away with God and just sort of have been discouraged in that. And the main one I noticed is that people will maybe try a silence and solitude retreat once, and it is very disorienting. And so they're like, "That looks terrible. I don't want to do that again. I'm just going to stick to these other things". And so I began writing the retreats out of that place. So they feel very organic to me in the sense that they were written for very specific people in specific stages of life, and they were meant

to be a scaffolding to hold up their soul while they're in silence and solitude, so they don't just become totally detached from the world and spin out and God's silent and "What's happening, why am I doing this?"

And so the more I met with people seemed began to emerge of reasons that you might want to go into silence and solitude. So the first retreat is there's a really general one, and I did several versions of that because it's just a really easy intro. I have a six hour version and a 24 hour and a 48 hour of one style of retreat, which is a general for one in need of rest. So basically everybody. And then the rest came out of these personal interactions.

So I had a friend who lost his best friend and said, "I really need to process this grief. I need to get away and spend some time with the Lord wrestling through some of the stuff that's coming up." And so I wrote him a grief retreat and that ended up being something several other, the people said, "Oh, will you send me your grief retreat? My child has gone on to college, I feel grief or I've lost a significant relationship, or someone has died," and they have come to a point in life where they need to sit with that grief with the Lord and see what He would do with it.

Another one is for one in need of discernment. And that has been a competitive scene that people have come into direction saying, I'm at this crossroad in life where I'm choosing a spouse or a job or a move, and I just really need to get away in silence with the Lord and see what He might have to say to me. So all of them came out of these really specific interactions that I noticed across the board kept coming up. So it was these scenes that wasn't just unique to this one person, transitions, weariness, discernment. These are things that are common to everybody. And so I just sort of grouped them into the five that were most prevalent and most common, and that's how they came to be.

**Christin Thieme:** And for somebody listening who maybe has never taken a spiritual retreat, you've said it's not just sitting in solitude, it's not exactly a vacation necessarily. How would you describe what exactly a spiritual retreat is and what you do during one?

**Alyson Pryor:** It's most basic level. It is the connection point. It's fostering that connection point between us and God. And so it's very similar to something like a honeymoon where two lovers will get away. They're moving themselves from the rest of the world, from their other family members, from their friends, from their community, and they're getting away to spend time one-on-one just to deepen that relationship. And so for me, it feels very similar to that in that it's a vacation with the Lord. It's a honeymoon for lovers. A very, in my experience, has been life-giving in the sense that it's that coming away to be loved by God and to love Him and just have that separate sanctuary of time away from the demands of everyday life. And then what you might do is just any activity that fosters that. So I quite a bit about in the preparation section, I talk quite a bit about embodiment and sort of what's happening to our bodies on retreat, which is why I kind of push for the 48 hour.

So all of the retreats are 48 hour. It's only the first one that I offer a six hour and a 24 because I'm really trying to move people into taking at least 48 hours away. And that's because that's what's happening on retreat is a lot of things. The first thing is we're like our brains are trying to make sense of being alone, being in silence. Some people are not accustomed to that, and our bodies are being

used to being separated from other bodies and our ears are being used to not hearing constant media or distractions of people.

And so there's a lot going on for years actually, I paid attention to my own rhythm of retreat and what's happening right now, what is happening when I arrive in a new place, my body kind of feels unsafe or I feel like I can't quite relax, why is that? But then by day two I really kind of settled in and so now I'm ready for a little bit of more content and I can actually think through some more challenging scriptures. Whereas day one, I just needed a nap and I just needed somebody to recite a prayer over me.

And so I paid attention to my own personal rhythms of entering. And then also I write pretty extensively about what it means to leave a retreat and kind of what's happening as you reintegrate into your home life. And that kind of makes the connection with fasting that the longer you fast, the more gently you need to break a fast, that you have to be really careful what you eat and what you can't just have a six course meal after fasting for 15 days. And so I kind of make some connections there about what's happening even after our retreat and that sometimes we're metabolizing things weeks after our retreat where we're kind of making sense of what God was doing during the time.

So it's absolutely packed with questions to prepare someone, questions to engage with while you're away and questions for debrief. But the main structure of it is very much almost like what you would expect if you brought your own personal spiritual director on a retreat with you. It's conversational. There's a lot of scripture, a lot of poetry I go through the hours of the day. So it kind of helps people stabilize if they feel like, I don't know, what am I supposed to be reading? Am I supposed to be walking? Am I supposed to be like, what am I supposed to be doing? It is really structured in that way to allow people to have then freedom not to worry about what's going to happen in the morning, not feel anxiety about what's going to happen after, the evening is all written out for you.

**Christin Thieme:** Beyond the demands on our everyday schedules and so forth, at sort of a deeper level, what do you think makes it so difficult for people to slow down even when we know that we need this time?

**Alyson Pryor:** Well, the most honest answer that I can give is I think that when we are afraid to come away with God, not because of we're afraid of what He will say, I think we're afraid that He won't speak at all. And I think that that is a deeply rooted dread that we're then alone in the universe. So I think it really taps into our existential dread that we are alone and that there is no one out there. So I don't think we're consciously doing that, but I would say that I'm thinking of as you ask the question, I'm thinking of... I gave a talk many years ago throughout one whole year on practicing Sabbath as a busy mom. And I had one woman come up to me after a large event and she had her calendar in her hand and she pointed out every day, I mean she opened it for me and let me see, every single day of the month was just absolutely packed with her very precise cursive writing. And she was just packed and she said, "Where am I supposed to fit rest into here?" And was almost upset with me, was kind of, yeah, making me make sense of her calendar. "How am I supposed to fit it in here?"

And it was a really honest question actually, I think of her often because it's a very honest question of where does it fit? How do I make it work? And I think that it feels very practical. It feels like my

schedule's booked, I can't make the room. But I think when we get a few layers deeper, we realize that we have the room, we're just filling it with other things and that we aren't prioritizing it for various reasons. And the biggest one I've seen at least in spiritual direction, is this fear that God won't show up and what does that say about me, about what I'm giving my life to? And so yeah, I think it's a lot of fear of that and maybe it would be easier to say fear of being alone. But yeah, that's the one that seems most common to me and to me as well, that's something that I encounter personally.

**Christin Thieme:** It seems like a legitimate fear. And what's your response to that then, if that is one of the big fears people have in going to do this time for themselves?

**Alyson Pryor:** Yeah, yeah, that was a question I kept asking myself over and over and over as I wrote this book was, in every prayer prompt and every poem and every essay, how can I assure people of God's love for them? Because that's just so much of my work as a spiritual director is to come alongside people and remind them that God's here, God loves you, He's present, that's the thing. We are just so readily discouraged and sure that God is not with us and that God is not doing anything that we're just alone in the universe.

And so it was helpful to be actively working as a director as I wrote this book because it prompted quite a bit of compassion in me as I wrote it. And one of the main things I included every single day of the four-day retreats is I include what's called the Prayer of Recollection, and that was a prayer that I was given by one of my seminary professors and I adapted it and changed it, but it's basically a prayer that opens us up to God's love and reminds us who we are, who we are in Him.

And it's just a very straightforward, like this is who God is, this is who I am, Lord, have your way. And that is the anchor that I just keep weaving in over and over and over throughout the retreat, knowing how unmooring the experience of silence and solitude can be very disorienting. And so I was super conscious over and over and over to keep hooking people back into the reality of this is who God says He is. This is who God says you are. It's going to be okay. So I kept that conversational tone so that people would feel that connection and feel that assurance and have someone outside themselves saying that you're going to be okay. God's with you. God loves you, He has a plan for you.

**Christin Thieme:** For somebody who's never done a personal spiritual retreat before, where would you suggest they start in an ideal setting? What would that first experience look like?

**Alyson Pryor:** I talk quite a bit about monastic communities, there's so many more than we would assume, where they house people coming for a personal retreat, it's a very common thing. And I was not raised Roman Catholic, so I did not know the Catholics know this. That's not news to them, but it was news to me. And I have had some of my most, the grief retreat that I actually took for myself after my father passed I did in a monastic community precisely because I really wanted to be held by the hours of the day. So this one in Oceanside, actually, you'd be familiar with where it is, they pray through the hours every day, every single day. It is just a set time. You can go into the chapel, they're going to pray and sing over you, and it's just this rhythm that is embedded into their daily life that they welcome you into and they feed you and there's beautiful grounds.

So I would say for those who are kind of trying to figure it out, look into monastic communities, I could name five easily off the top of my head just in the LA region, which is so much more than I would've known before I started looking. But I would say, yeah, I would say start with something really structured. And so that's, the book is really clear. This is so many questions and so much content. You don't have to do it all. It's meant to be for the person who's just beginning, who really needs quite a bit of structure and content to keep them feeling anchored in what's happening. So yeah, I think that would be my suggestion is to enter, because you're in solitude, but you're also in community. So it just offers a really good balance, I think.

**Christin Thieme:** Parenthood, as you said, adds a whole other level we know to everything. So for this topic specifically, can families practice retreat together or is solitude really essential to the process?

**Alyson Pryor:** I think solitude is essential to the process. I think Sabbath is meant to be practiced in the family setting. I think that if we look at the life of Jesus, it's pretty clear that there were times of rest that He was with people. So He was with His disciples on the Sabbath, and then there's these moments where He just up and leaves and wanders into the wilderness. It says in Luke, "As often as possible, He withdrew to lonely places and prayed." So I think that Jesus offers a really good example of practicing rest in community, which is very accessible and doable. We practice it in our home on the Sabbath, but then retreating, I think, at least for me personally, and maybe this answer won't change as my kids grow, but for me it's essential that I am in silence and solitude. It has become a core discipline of my life, and it's that pulling away from my children specifically that allows me to gain better clarity of what's happening.

So I'm thinking of one I took last year as my eldest son was launching into college. I was experiencing a lot of grief and I thought, "Oh, I'm going to go away and do my grief retreat." And that's not at all what happened. It was a whole different thing that Lord was doing. So that's actually a good point to make is that God has His own agenda for your time away with Him. And I ended up doing all kinds of, He took me in a different path, but that zooming out of my life and being away from my children actually gave me greater clarity as to what was happening. The Lord enabled me, me to see some patterns of behavior I was enabling. He really was able to correct and shape some things that I would not have seen had I stayed in close proximity to my kids. So it was in the removal that I was able to be like, oh, this is actually not helpful. Oh, I really am not trusting in more in this area. Oh yeah. So I would argue that it's the silence and the solitude are essential.

**Christin Thieme:** We know from Scripture, God rests on the seventh day, Jesus frequently withdrew to pray on His own. What do you think the church as a whole can do differently to model and encourage the rhythms of work and rest that we see across Scripture?

**Alyson Pryor:** Yeah, that's a great and very loaded question. I thought quite a bit about the church as I wrote this and especially the conclusion. My entire conclusion is called Coming Away in Community, and I wanted to illustrate what's happening, kind of what I just talked about. It was in my removal for my children that I had a better sense of clarity of how to better parent in the season and how to pray more deeply into certain things and conviction over bad patterns. And so I make the argument in that

conclusion chapter that if we refuse to come away, if we neglect coming away, we actually are not giving into our community in the same way. So it kind of came out of the idea that many people have, which is like, “Oh, this is extravagant. This is even Christian [inaudible 00:23:19] gazing. There’s so much important kingdom work to be doing. Like how dare we go hang out with the monks for a few days and retreat?”

And so my conclusion was sort of trying to tie together the idea of the ancient practice of secrecy, which is cultivating that interior place of the Lord where the Holy Spirit dwells within us and the discipline of community, which is out in the world in community. And so I kind of frame them as two sides of one coin, that if we refuse to come away, we actually are less equipped to minister and meaning that when we come away, we’re cultivating this interior space between us and the Lord, and we actually are making that space larger and more robust to hold other people when we’re back in community.

There’s a great quote, I’m actually looking up to make sure I say it correctly, that I quoted from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He said, “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community and let him who is not in community be aware of being alone.” And so I really think that there’s an important connection to be made to what kind of people we’re becoming in community. Are we in community but sort of needing and bleeding and demanding and resentful of the people in our community? Or are we in community in a spacious way where we can hold other people, where we have room for them and how do we become that kind of person? And so for me, in my own experience, practicing a rhythm of retreating has actually made my working community more robust. I’m more able to welcome more people into my home and into my life, and I’m a stronger person in ministry for having practices.

**Christin Thieme:** You mentioned your own retreat practice. What does that look like now?

**Alyson Pryor:** So I like to say it’s more than this, but it’s twice a year. I do it every spring and every fall. That’s the bare minimum. I would like to say it’s four times a year. That has often been my goal and I just cannot seem to get there. But for right now, with the phase of life that I’m in, twice a year is the very minimum of what I need to recalibrate. And that is more accessible to me because still in the semester system, I have so many kids in different schools and different ages. And so yeah, every fall and every spring is a good time for me to get away and to practice it. I would like for it to be more is the short answer.

**Christin Thieme:** Yes. What would you say to somebody who’s listening right now and thinking, “I really need this, but I don’t even know where to start.” I mean, for one, get this book for sure, but where would you say to start?

**Alyson Pryor:** The most honest answer I can give is starting in the place I did, which was “God, you say you want to rest. For me, what does that mean?” And really opening to that in prayer, when you’re with God, when you are with the Lord in your own private time, whatever that looks like, opening to that place within you that is aware of the longing within you to rest. I think it took a long time of me being honest with God about that before I even was able to move forward. So the opener of the book tells a story of... My beginning retreat rhythm was very faltering and messy, but it was with these nuns

who lived really close to my kid's school and they offered overnight retreats, but they also offered you could just go to their house for the day for \$15 and they gave you a private room and a bathroom, they fed you, they left you alone and you have access to their library and their grounds. And it was a practice that actually saved my life in those years of parenting a lot of young kids.

And so I would say start with the longing because that is a good indicator that God is doing something in you because it says that we cannot even cry out to God, we can't even call out the Father without the Holy Spirit in us doing that. So I think that the longing for rest is actually this place within us that connects us to the Holy Spirit. It's being honest with, "I'm exhausted, God, where are you in this? How do I obey your call to Sabbath or even retreat? How do I enter into rest something you want for me if it logistically seems impossible?" And just sitting, just doing that over and over every day in your prayer life. And He will answer that prayer and He will meet you where you are. I'm sure of that. If I can do it with five kids and a husband who's a fireman, yes, He can do it.

**Christin Thieme:** It's possible.

**Alyson Pryor:** He can make it happen.

**Christin Thieme:** Well, Alyson, what is giving you hope right now?

**Alyson Pryor:** What's giving me hope right now? Gosh, the thing that comes first in my mind is that God is moving in the generation behind us and thinking specifically of Gen Z and Gen Alpha. We're really involved in young life as well. And just in the last week, I've had several really interesting conversations with, because several of my older... My oldest is college, and then my next two are high school. And so just watching them and their friends and the conversations they're having, the things that capture their imagination, the way that the kingdom is being manifest in that generation is giving me so much hope because in my younger years of parenting, it felt like doom and gloom, the Internet's here, iPhones are here, what's happening? We're all, the whole ship is going down. I have just seen the research is overwhelming in this area too, that there's just a real resurgence of young people in the church and they are hungry for something real and something that they cannot find anywhere else. And so that has given me hope.

#### **Additional resources:**

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