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Leadership failure and divine renewal: A theological study of Elijah in 1 Kings 19

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Author:
Asep Afaradi[1] ●

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Christian Leadership, Faculty of Theology, IKAT Theological School, Jakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding author:
Asep Afaradi,
asepafriadi69@gmail.com

This study discussed deviations in work ethic within spiritual leadership by focusing on the story of prophet Elijah based on 1 Kings 19. The purpose of this research was to reveal the factors causing spiritual fatigue that affects the work ethic of spiritual leaders and to explore the principles of divine restoration from a theological perspective. The method used was a qualitative approach with literature study and narrative analysis of the biblical text. The results showed that Elijah's fatigue and deviation in work ethic were triggered by psychological pressure, fear and loneliness; however, God restored him through the provision of physical needs, spiritual encouragement and a new commission. This discussion emphasised that the restoration of work ethos in spiritual leadership cannot be separated from ongoing spiritual care, the support of a faith-based community and obedience to God's guidance. These three aspects are key to addressing spiritual exhaustion and deviations in work ethos, as exemplified in the experience of the prophet Elijah, who was restored through God's provision of physical needs, spiritual strengthening, and reaffirmation of his ministerial calling.

Contribution: This study offers a theological perspective on spiritual leaders' fatigue through the story of Elijah, affirming that God provides restoration and encouraging the church to develop spiritual mentorship and healthy leadership.

Keywords: work ethic; leadership; divine restoration; prophet Elijah; 1 Kings 19.

Introduction

Spiritual leadership is not only about managing tasks but also about providing a spiritual example that shapes the direction of the community's life. However, in practice, spiritual leaders often face pressure and emotional fatigue that can lead to deviations in work ethics and a decline in the integrity of their service (Samul 2024:47). The phenomenon of burnout in spiritual leadership has become a serious issue widely discussed in recent literature. Maslach and Leiter, in one of their classic studies, define burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and decreased personal accomplishment that often affect workers involved in human services, including spiritual leaders (Sandage, Stein & Vanderbeck 2025:1–26).

The phenomenon of leader fatigue is not merely a physical issue but is closely related to the quality of one's relationship with God and their perspective on calling and ministry responsibilities. At a certain point, fatigue can lead to deviations in work ethic, ranging from avoidance of responsibility, decreased motivation, to actions that no longer reflect the expected integrity of leadership. Recent research by Innstrand et al. shows that fatigue among religious leaders correlates with work-family conflict as well as weak spiritual and social support within the ministry environment (Innstrand, Haver & Olsen 2011:125). This indicates that fatigue not only affects the leader personally but also impacts the quality of their relationships with the people they lead.

The prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19:1–18 is one of the biblical figures who profoundly illustrates fatigue, deviation in work motivation, and divine restoration. After a great victory over the prophets of Baal, Elijah suddenly fell into despair and prayed for his life to be taken. This experience shows that even a powerful spiritual leader remains vulnerable as a human being. Mental pressure can weaken a person's motivation in ministry, making the process of restoration an essential part of the journey of faith and leadership.

Another relevant case is the fatigue and integrity crisis experienced by several contemporary church leaders, such as scandals involving megachurch leaders who had to resign because of

ministry pressures and moral issues (The Kumparan News 2020). The Barna Group reports that 'burnout, isolation, and pressure to appear perfect' are major factors accelerating these crises among contemporary church leaders (Barna Group 2017:17). Many of these cases show that fatigue, if not addressed spiritually and communally, can lead to destructive decisions. Ruth Haley Barton emphasises that when leaders lack space for soul restoration and deep reflection, they tend to lose moral clarity and fall into compromise (Barton 2018:62). In this context, the implementation of a structured mentoring or accountability system becomes critically important to ensure that leaders are not left to confront the significant challenges of ministry in isolation.

The emphasis on the aspect of work ethic deviation is evident when Elijah, in his fatigue, no longer focuses on his prophetic calling. He chooses to flee to the wilderness, abandoning the prophetic duty entrusted to him. From a modern leadership perspective, this action can be associated with withdrawal behaviour, which is the tendency to retreat from responsibilities because of prolonged stress. (Demerouti et al. 2011:24). However, Elijah's story does not end with failure. God's act of restoring Elijah through his angel shows that in a leader's fatigue, the grace of restoration is always available as a form of divine care. This restoration not only renews Elijah's physical strength but also his vision, mission and commitment to his calling as a prophet.

Furthermore, the context of modern society, which demands high performance and instant results, often becomes a double burden for leaders, including church leaders. The pressure to remain productive, to quickly respond to the needs of the congregation and to display ministry success amid inter-church or denominational competition increasingly intensifies their responsibilities. This phenomenon corresponds with the findings of Freudenberger, who first popularised the term *burnout* to describe the extreme exhaustion experienced by those who work with great dedication for others (Freudenberger 2019:126). In the corporate world, for example, *burnout* is evident among employees are pressured to meet excessive targets within short deadlines; in education, teachers face stress from having to fulfil both academic standards and students' emotional needs; while in ministry, the burden emerges when leaders feel compelled to always be available for the congregation, attend numerous meetings, deliver high-quality sermons weekly, comfort grieving families and simultaneously serve as flawless moral examples. When the demands of ministry are not balanced with spiritual renewal and community support, exhaustion can easily develop into an inability to maintain a healthy and responsible work ethic. Consequently, serious symptoms may arise, such as loss of motivation, decline in ministry quality and even a crisis of faith that contradicts the very calling of ministry itself.

Thus, this study is expected to contribute to the discourse of practical theology, particularly in developing patterns of church leadership that are responsible, healthy and sensitive

to the need for spiritual restoration. In addition, this study is relevant for enriching the literature on the relationship between leadership spirituality and mental health, as Chandler reminds us that spiritual well-being plays a crucial role in reducing the risk of burnout among spiritual leaders (Chandler 2009:87).

This phenomenon raises important theological questions about how fatigue can affect the integrity and responsibility of leadership, as well as how divine restoration works in the process of restoring a leader's work ethic. Therefore, this article aims to answer several key questions, including: *What forms of work ethic deviation did prophet Elijah experience in 1 Kings 19:1–18? What factors influenced this condition within the context of spiritual leadership? And how does God's intervention serve as a path of restoration that is not only personal but also renews the weakened leadership calling?*

Therefore, this article not only aims to interpret the biblical text historically but also seeks to contextualise it with the challenges of modern church leadership, so that every leader can learn from Elijah: that fatigue is not the end of the calling, but rather a moment for God to restore, strengthen and renew the weary heart for the continuation of ministry with integrity.

Background of prophet Elijah's flight (1 Ki 19:3)

Elijah's story in 1 Kings 19 reveals the vulnerability of a great prophet amid inner pressure and physical threat. Although he had just defeated the prophets of Baal, Elijah was overwhelmed with fear after being threatened by Jezebel and chose to flee for his life. 1 Kings 19:3 records Elijah's flight as the beginning of a profound spiritual struggle. This event reflects the tension between obedience as a prophet and his human weakness in facing life's pressures.

The historical context of Israel during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel greatly influenced this situation. Jezebel's power, originating from Sidon, brought the aggressive worship of Baal into Israel, which severely threatened Elijah's position as a prophet of Yahweh. According to John Barton, Elijah was a figure who 'stood between the divine will and Israel's spiritual decline', which made him a prime target for rulers who rejected conversion (Barton 2007:143).

Elijah's flight to Beersheba was not merely a physical act of self-preservation but also carried deep theological meaning. Beersheba is located at the southernmost border of the kingdom of Judah, which means Elijah truly left the northern kingdom of Israel under Ahab's rule. This signifies that Elijah was not only fleeing from Jezebel but also from his calling as a prophet amid a stubborn people. In contemporary studies, Wendy Zoba explains that Elijah's flight can be read as the spiritual burnout experienced by a servant of God who is faced with the harsh reality of rejection by the Israelites (Zoba 2019:43). This statement shows that the reality of

rejection in ministry can have an impact on the service of a servant of God.

Furthermore, this flight also reveals the psychological aspect of Elijah as an ordinary human being full of fear. In one modern pastoral study, J. Gordon Harris emphasises that this episode proves that great biblical figures are not exempt from depression, despair and the desire to give up (Harris 2015:14). Elijah, who had previously boldly challenged hundreds of Baal's prophets, suddenly collapsed mentally when faced with the threat of a queen. This situation highlights the deep contradiction between prophetic courage and emotional vulnerability that often colours the journey of God's messengers.

In a psychotheological review, Bruce C. Birch relates Elijah's flight to the dynamics of contemporary ministry. He argues that many modern spiritual leaders experience similar pressures when the idealism of ministry clashes with a world that rejects the truth (Birch 2019:37). Therefore, Elijah's flight narrative opens a space for reflection for the contemporary church on the importance of supporting spiritual leaders in facing mental and spiritual pressures.

Mental and spiritual pressure experienced (1 Ki 19:4)

The climax of Elijah's inner struggle is seen when he pleads with God to take his life, expressing deep spiritual exhaustion and despair, feeling that his ministry has been in vain. This situation serves as one of the clearest portrayals of spiritual depression in the Bible. According to James L. Crenshaw, Elijah's mental condition reflects a crisis of prophetic identity, where the failure to change the hearts of the Israelites leads to a profound sense of helplessness (Crenshaw 2017:23). Elijah seemed to view himself as no better than the previous generations, who also failed to lead Israel back to the ways of the Lord.

In contemporary pastoral studies, the phenomenon of *compassion fatigue* has become a significant focus in describing the condition of today's spiritual leaders, who often face emotional stress and the burden of trauma from the congregations they serve. For example, a 2023 study indicates that spiritual leaders are vulnerable to stress because of expectations to function as counsellors, a lack of mental health training and the pressure to always be available; therefore, support from fellow ministers as well as family is greatly needed so that they do not feel isolated (Malone & Lewis 2023:64–72).

Deviation of work ethic: Causes and impacts

A healthy work ethic is a crucial foundation for the quality of life of individuals and communities. It encompasses motivation, meaning and relationships not merely productivity. However, in reality, work ethic often deviates because of fear, despair and isolation. The story of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19:10 illustrates this condition, as he feels alone, overwhelmed and hopeless ultimately affecting his motivation and faithfulness in carrying out his prophetic calling.

Fear, despair, and isolation (1 Ki 19:10)

Fear is one of the most significant psychological factors that can influence work ethic. In Elijah's case, fear of Jezebel's threat drove him into the wilderness and led him to hide on Mount Horeb. This fear not only disrupted his emotional stability but also caused spiritual disorientation. Spiritual disorientation refers to a state in which a person loses direction or certainty in their relationship with God and in understanding their spiritual calling or duties. In the modern context, fear in the workplace may arise from pressure from superiors, job insecurity or an unsupportive environment. As explained by Luthans, fear and anxiety, when persistent, can lead to learned helplessness and burnout, especially in high-pressure work environments (Luthans & Youssef 2007:159). When individuals feel constantly under threat or pressure, they tend to lose initiative, enthusiasm and the courage to act proactively. In the long run, unresolved fear will undermine the integrity of a person's work ethic and trigger deviations both morally and professionally.

In addition to fear, despair is also a major cause of the distortion of work ethic. Despair arises when a person feels that all their efforts and hard work result in no change or appreciation. Elijah, in his despair, said that he had worked zealously but continued to face rejection and threats. This situation led him to feel that his struggle was in vain. In a study conducted by Snyder and Lopez, it is stated that, hopelessness undermines goal-directed behaviour by extinguishing one's belief in the possibility of positive change (eds. Snyder & Lopez 2002:43). This despair causes a person to lose sight of their ultimate goals and weakens their sense of responsibility. In the workplace, this can be observed in the form of decreased productivity, high absenteeism and even resignation. Such conditions not only affect the individual but also extend to the work team and the institution as a whole.

The third factor that exacerbates the deviation of work ethic is isolation. Elijah felt that he was the only one still faithful to God, while others had abandoned their faith. Isolation, both social and spiritual, leads to a deep sense of alienation and loneliness. In a study conducted by Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton, it was found that, social isolation and loneliness are associated with increased risk for mortality, depression, and reduced work engagement (Holt-Lunstad, Smith & Layton 2010:126). Isolation causes a person to lose the emotional and spiritual support needed to maintain motivation and commitment in their work. In the context of a ministry community, feelings of isolation can lead to cynicism, withdrawal from the community or even a loss of faith. In many cases, however, such isolation is a subjective perception that does not reflect reality as in the case of Elijah, who was unaware that there were still 7000 Israelites who had not bowed to Baal.

These three factors – fear, despair and isolation – not only affect an individual's inner condition, but also contribute to broader deviations in work behaviour. Such deviations may take the form of neglecting responsibilities, unethical conduct or even apathy towards one's duties. When a person feels that their work no longer has meaning or impact, their intrinsic motivation begins to decline. Ryan and Deci, in their Self-Determination Theory, explain that the basic human needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are essential for sustaining healthy work motivation (Ryan & Deci 2000:17). When these needs are threatened or lost because of fear, despair and isolation, a person may experience deep demotivation and ultimately deviate from the work ethic values they once upheld.

Nevertheless, the story of Elijah also offers an important lesson about the restoration of work ethic through divine intervention and spiritual renewal. God did not allow Elijah to remain in despair; instead, he approached him personally through a 'gentle whisper', a symbol of God's tender and restorative presence. God provided Elijah with food, time to rest and a new direction to continue his ministry. In this context, the restoration of work ethic requires a holistic approach that includes physical, emotional, and spiritual recovery. This approach is also supported by Fredrickson's findings on the broaden-and-build theory, which suggest that positive emotions such as gratitude, hope and love can expand an individual's cognitive and social capacities, thereby building resilience to stress and enhancing work engagement (Fredrickson 2001:65).

In the context of contemporary ministry and work, churches and Christian institutions are challenged to create environments that support the strengthening of work ethic based on faith values. Spiritual leaders must recognise that the pressures and burdens of ministry can lead individuals to a breaking point, much like Elijah experienced. Therefore, it is essential to build supportive communities, create spaces for reflection and provide adequate psychological and spiritual support. In addition, training in stress management, ongoing spiritual formation and character development should become integral parts of the mentoring system for church workers and Christian professionals.

Implications for Elijah's leadership role (1 Ki 19:14)

The impact of Elijah's deviation from his work ethic was not only felt personally but also affected the continuity of the leadership task entrusted to him. When a leader begins to feel that their work is in vain, it becomes likely that they will withdraw from their responsibilities. This is evident in Elijah's decision to isolate himself on Mount Horeb, far from the tasks and community he was called to serve. In the context of modern ministry, this resembles a leader who has emotionally resigned, even though they may still formally hold their position. This phenomenon is described by Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, who note that *disengagement in leadership roles often begins with emotional exhaustion and*

unresolved disappointment, eventually leading to a loss of passion and clarity of purpose (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison 2011:48). Such deviation leads to ministry stagnation, loss of vision, and a weakened drive to bring about transformation and renewal among the people.

Elijah's statement also reveals a misunderstanding in his perception of reality. He believed that he was the only one still faithful to God, while in fact, the Lord later revealed that there were still 7000 people who had not bowed to Baal (1Ki 19:18). This shows that when a person is under pressure and exhaustion, they tend to perceive the situation narrowly and inaccurately (Mann & Tan 1993:197–207). This lack of objective perception becomes part of the deviation from work ethic, as the individual begins to construct arguments that justify their despair and reluctance to continue the task. In their research, Hannah, Avolio, and Walumbwa state that, leaders under prolonged stress may begin to construct cognitive distortions that serve to protect their sense of agency, but which ultimately impair judgement and relational clarity (Hanna, Avolio & Walumbwa 2011:28–34). Elijah experienced this distortion of perception, which ultimately led to his spiritual and emotional withdrawal.

Elijah's deviation from his work ethic had a significant impact on his leadership, causing personal exhaustion and the cessation of his strategic role in leading God's people. However, God emotionally restored Elijah and gave him a new mission to ensure the continuation of his task, including anointing Hazael, Jehu, and appointing Elisha as his successor. This underscores the importance of recontextualising the calling and role of leaders who experience a decline in work ethic so that they can effectively resume their functions.

In the context of modern Christian ministry and organisations, deviations in work ethic such as those experienced by Elijah should not be overlooked. Many church leaders and ministers face ministry fatigue because of high expectations, a lack of support and continuous ministry pressures. Ministry organisations need to pay close attention to the spiritual and emotional health of their leaders. According to a study, clergy burnout is strongly correlated with a lack of social support and a theological framework that overemphasises personal sacrifice without sufficient reflection on boundaries and rest (Miner & Dowson 2010:167).

Therefore, healthy leadership training needs to include the development of capacities for rest, reflection, and strengthening supportive communities. Furthermore, Elijah's story teaches that deviations in work ethic can become pivotal moments in a leader's growth process. When appropriately responded to both by the individual and the community, such crises can lead to transformation, renewed vision, and a shift towards healthier and more sustainable leadership. Elijah, who initially felt alone and useless, ultimately gained a new perspective on the importance of leadership regeneration, task delegation and the presence of

a faithful community. This aligns with the ideas of Heifetz and Linsky; adaptive leadership involves recognising one's limitations and shifting roles to sustain mission beyond personal capacity (Heifetz & Linsky 2000:19–25). God did not require Elijah to accomplish everything on his own, but rather led him to the awareness of the importance of collaboration and the passing on of the mission.

Divine restoration

The story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19 reveals the human side of a great prophet who experienced exhaustion and spiritual crisis following Jezebel's threat. Rather than rebuking him, God responded with a gentle and comprehensive pattern of divine restoration through food, rest, and spiritual guidance, demonstrating his care for human needs in a holistic manner.

As the first step, God restored Elijah physically by providing food and rest, as described in 1 Kings 19:5–8. This physical restoration is considered an essential part of the overall recovery, indicating that in facing ministry fatigue, physical needs must also be addressed as an expression of God's grace. According to Philip D.W. Krey, God's care for humans begins with the fulfilment of basic bodily needs, such as food and sleep, before any further guidance or correction is given (Krey 2011:96). God delayed giving a reprimand or directive, permitting Elijah to recover physically first.

The second step of divine restoration is spiritual guidance, where after physical recovery, Elijah undertakes a 40-day spiritual journey to Mount Horeb. There, God reveals himself not through powerful forces such as an earthquake or fire, but through a gentle and quiet voice, marking a significant shift in the way God communicates with Elijah. James L. Crenshaw states that, the still small voice is a corrective theological motif, reminding prophets and readers alike that divine power often operates in quiet, unseen ways (Crenshaw 2018:39). This spiritual restoration teaches that God understands the depths of a weary soul and approaches it not with pressure, but with peace. The underlying assumption is that the experience of theophany is not always manifested through spectacular events, but can also be revealed in simple, yet profoundly meaningful forms. This perspective aligns with the intertextual pattern in the Bible, for example, in comparison with Moses' experience on Mount Sinai, where the divine manifestation was present both through powerful natural phenomena and through moments of sacred silence (Van Der Walt 2014:56).

Theological reflection and contemporary relevance

The story of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19 offers a theological reflection that is relevant for today's spiritual leaders facing pressure, despair and loneliness in ministry. This narrative emphasises two important aspects: spiritual accompaniment and self-care (v.7), as well as the strengthening of identity and God's faithfulness (v. 18). This

series of experiences proves that God not only cares, but also actively acts to restore his servants.

The concept of spiritual accompaniment, illustrated through the angel's ministry to Elijah, is highly relevant to contemporary pastoral care. Spiritual leaders such as pastors, evangelists and church workers often experience heavy pressures leading to emotional and spiritual exhaustion. In their research, Miner, Sterland, and Dowson state that, clergy burnout can be significantly mitigated through intentional spiritual direction and peer support systems (Miner & Sterland 2010:243). This indicates that the importance of a spiritual support system is not merely supplementary but a primary necessity for maintaining the sustainability and health of spiritual ministry. Just as Elijah needed 'food and rest' in both physical and spiritual terms, modern spiritual leaders also require times of solitude, spiritual retreats, supportive communities, and healthy self-care disciplines.

Furthermore, 1 Kings 19:7 reveals the importance of acknowledging human limitations. The angel of the Lord did not say that Elijah was strong or capable of enduring everything on his own. Instead, he emphasised that the journey was 'too great' for him without renewed strength from God. This is an important recognition that even a great prophet has limits. In the context of modern ministry, this challenges the ideology that demands relentless performance. Pastoral theologian Andrew Irvine notes that, the myth of the tireless servant is both unrealistic and spiritually dangerous (Irvine 2014:159). Acknowledging limitations is not a sign of weakness but a path towards true restoration. Therefore, churches and ministry organisations should cultivate a culture of self-care and balanced emotional support as an integral part of ministry spirituality.

Conclusion

This study highlights the deviation of work ethic in spiritual leadership through the story of the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19. Elijah experienced physical exhaustion and a spiritual crisis after severe pressure from Jezebel and disappointment with the people of Israel, which led him to despair and a desire to end his life. However, through God's intervention providing food, rest, and new direction, Elijah was holistically restored physically, emotionally and spiritually. This demonstrates that deviation from work ethic is not the end of ministry but can be the beginning of renewal and restoration of their prophetic mission.

For further development, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies on the work ethic of other prophets, as well as contextual analyses on the relevance of divine restoration principles in contemporary church leadership. An interdisciplinary approach combining pastoral psychology and theology is also important to formulate a more comprehensive restoration model. In addition, research on congregational responses to leaders experiencing setbacks, as well as the development of leadership training modules based on Elijah's story,

can make significant contributions to strengthening healthy and sustainable spiritual ministry.

Disclaimer

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