

Homiletics Analysis: Judges 9

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Judges 9 is the longest chapter in the book and narrates the rise and catastrophic fall of Abimelech, the son of Gideon (Jerubbaal) by a Shechemite concubine. Abimelech leverages his maternal kinship with Shechem to secure funding from the temple of Baal-Berith, hires worthless and reckless men, and murders seventy of his brothers on a single stone — all in a bid to make himself king. Only Jotham, the youngest, escapes. Jotham delivers his famous fable from the top of Mount Gerizim (vv. 7–21), in which the trees seek a king and only the worthless bramble accepts the role, issuing a chilling conditional curse upon the people of Shechem and upon Abimelech himself. Jotham then flees. The chapter's middle section (vv. 22–49) chronicles the inevitable unraveling: God sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem, treachery multiplies, Gaal son of Ebed arrives and stirs rebellion, Abimelech brutally destroys Shechem and Thebez — burning alive the people who took refuge in the tower of Shechem's temple of El-Berith, the very site whose silver funded his rise. The chapter concludes with his death at Thebez (vv. 50–57): a woman drops a millstone on Abimelech's head, and he dies — asking his armor-bearer to run him through so it cannot be said a woman killed him. The narrator closes with a formal verdict: God repaid both Abimelech's evil and the wickedness of the Shechemites, and Jotham's curse came to pass.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to produce holy fear of power seized without His call, sober recognition that political violence and self-promotion carry within them the seeds of their own destruction, and trust that He governs history even when no judge is present and no covenant faithfulness is visible. The chapter functions as a dark mirror: what happens when Israel's instinct for ungodly kingship is indulged. God is pressing the reader to see that self-installed rule — power grasped rather than given, built on blood and bought with the currency of false gods — cannot stand. He is also vindicating His own judicial character: the curses of Jotham, spoken in His name, come to exact and terrible fulfillment. The reader is meant to feel the weight of divine patience, the inexorability of divine retribution, and the utter bankruptcy of human ambition unchecked by covenant.

Subject Sentence: Abimelech's self-seized kingship collapses under the weight of God's just retribution.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that power built on bloodshed, false alliance, and self-promotion will be dismantled by the very violence it unleashed — and that no curse spoken in His name falls to the ground.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature and function of Jotham's fable (vv. 7–21)

The fable is sometimes read primarily as political satire — a piece of wisdom literature critiquing kingship as an institution, functioning in ways analogous to later Israelite ambivalence about monarchy (cf. 1 Samuel 8). On this reading, Jotham's fable is essentially an anti-monarchical statement that the Deuteronomistic editors have embedded to frame the entire kingship question. This reading is worth *acknowledging* because the fable clearly does expose the absurdity of the worthless bramble claiming to offer shade — kingship pursued by the unworthy, accepted when the worthy refuse. The satire is real and pointed. However, the reading *overreaches* if it becomes a general polemic against all kingship: the fable does not condemn kingship as such but kingship built on the murder of legitimate heirs and secured by false religious alliance. The fable is conditional — “if you acted in good faith... rejoice in Abimelech; but if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and from the leaders of Shechem” (vv. 19–20). It is a covenantal lawsuit, not a constitutional argument. The Reformed reading locates the fable's force not in political theory but in covenant theology: Abimelech's kingship was illegitimate because it was built on violation of covenant kinship and funded by Baal-worship, not because kingship itself is corrupt.

The “evil spirit from God” (v. 23)

This phrase has generated significant discussion across traditions. Arminian and open theist interpreters tend to minimize divine agency here, treating the “evil spirit” as a permission God allowed rather than a judgment He actively sent — the concern being that God cannot be the direct cause of moral evil (treachery, division). Lutheran interpreters, working with a strong law/gospel structure, often read this as pure law — the operative principle of divine wrath working itself out through natural consequences. The Reformed reading does not shy from the text's own language: God actively sent this spirit of discord as an instrument of judicial retribution. This is consistent with the broader canon (1 Samuel 16:14, 1 Kings 22:19–23) where God governs even evil spirits in the service of His judicial purposes — without Himself being the author of the moral evil committed. The distinction is between God as the efficient cause of judgment and the human actors as the proximate cause of wickedness. The Reformed tradition's robust doctrine of providence can hold this without either making God the author of sin or evacuating His judicial agency. The text's own verdict in v. 56 — “God returned the evil of Abimelech” — demands that divine agency be preserved in the reading.

Is this chapter primarily about Abimelech or about Shechem?

Some interpreters, following the fable's address to the Shechemites, read the chapter as fundamentally a story about the people who chose the wrong king — a warning about complicity in unjust power. Others center Abimelech as the protagonist-villain. The text supports both without contradiction: the narrator explicitly states that God repaid *both* Abimelech (v. 56) and the men of Shechem (v. 57). The dual verdict is intentional. The chapter is not a story about one kind of sinner but about an entire ecosystem of covenantal unfaithfulness — the king who murders, the people who fund and acclaim him, and the God who brings both to reckoning. Exposition that focuses only on Abimelech-as-tyrant misses the chapter's searching indictment of those who use Baal's silver to buy their preferred ruler.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 17:14–20** — The Torah's law of the king: the king must be chosen by the LORD, must not multiply wealth or power, and must read the law daily. Abimelech violates every provision — chosen by himself, funded by pagan silver, ruling by terror. The chapter is the nightmare vision of Deuteronomy 17 enacted.
 - **1 Samuel 8:1–22** — Israel's demand for a king "like the nations" repeats the Shechemite dynamic. Samuel's warning that the king will take and take and take is the Abimelech pattern raised to national scale. Judges 9 is the first exhibit of what 1 Samuel 8 warns against.
 - **Proverbs 26:27** — "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling." The millstone that kills Abimelech is not merely ironic — it is the canon's wisdom principle made visible. The violence he set in motion returns to crush him.
 - **Galatians 6:7–8** — "God is not mocked; whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." Judges 9 is the Old Testament exhibition of this principle operating at the level of a life and a political movement. Sowing to the flesh — literally, to Baal-Berith — reaps corruption and destruction.
 - **Revelation 17–18** — The great city that persecutes through false alliance and accumulated blood is brought down by the very powers it used. The structural parallel illuminates Judges 9's theological logic: earthly power systems built on idolatry and bloodshed carry within them the mechanism of their own annihilation, administered by the just judgment of God.
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Aim: To expose the bankruptcy of self-seized power and awaken reverence for the God whose judicial purposes — including His spoken curses — are inexorably fulfilled in history.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Abimelech approaches his mother’s kinsmen in Shechem; appeals to blood loyalty; they favor him “for he is our brother”	Appeal to ethnic/family solidarity rather than merit or divine call
4	The men of Shechem give him 70 pieces of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith; he hires “worthless and reckless” men	The funding source is explicitly pagan; the character of his followers is named immediately
5	Abimelech murders seventy sons of Jerubbaal on one stone; only Jotham the youngest escapes	The number 70 is the full count — deliberate, systematic fratricide; “one stone” is ritual in its brutality
6	The leaders of Shechem and Beth-millo make Abimelech king by the oak of the pillar at Shechem	The coronation site — a pagan sacred tree — signals the covenant violation
7–15	Jotham’s fable from Mount Gerizim: olive, fig, and vine all refuse the offer of kingship; the bramble accepts and issues a conditional curse	The only tree willing to be king is useless and dangerous; Gerizim is the mountain of blessing (Deut. 27) — ironic platform for a curse
16–21	Jotham’s application: “if you acted in good faith... rejoice in Abimelech; but if not, let fire come from him and from you and consume each other”	A formal covenantal curse; Jotham then flees — he is the witness, not the avenger
22–25	After three years, God sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and Shechem; the men of Shechem deal treacherously, rob travelers	Three years of apparent stability precede the unraveling; God is the initiating agent of the collapse
26–29	Gaal son of Ebed arrives, wins the confidence of Shechem, and publicly challenges Abimelech’s	A new opportunist exploiting the same fractured system; the rebellion is internal to the system Abimelech built

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	right to rule	
30–33	Zebul, the ruler of Shechem loyal to Abimelech, warns him and devises the ambush	Even Abimelech’s own coalition is fragmented and treacherous
34–41	Abimelech attacks; Gaal is defeated and expelled by Zebul; the rebellion collapses	The immediate threat is suppressed but the judgment has been set in motion
42–45	Abimelech destroys Shechem, kills its people, tears it down, and sows it with salt	Total destruction of the city whose silver funded him; the instrument of his rise becomes the object of his wrath
46–49	The people of the Tower of Shechem take refuge in the stronghold of El-Berith; Abimelech burns it and kills approximately 1,000 men and women	The temple of El-Berith (= Baal-Berith) is destroyed by the man it funded — the idolatrous investment consumed
50–54	At Thebez, a woman drops a millstone on Abimelech’s head; he commands his armor-bearer to finish him to avoid the shame of death by a woman	His concern for reputation in the moment of divine judgment is the final expression of his character
55–57	When Abimelech dies, his men disperse; the narrator declares God repaid Abimelech’s evil to his father and God returned the evil of the men of Shechem on their own heads; Jotham’s curse was fulfilled	The double verdict — against king and people alike; the curse mechanism is divinely administered

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Making of a King: Blood Money and a Brother’s Grave
2	7–21	The Fable and the Curse:

Division	Verses	Label
		Jotham's Witness from Gerizim
3	22–41	The Unraveling Begins: God's Evil Spirit and Treachery's Harvest
4	42–49	Abimelech Destroys What Made Him: Shechem Burned
5	50–57	The Millstone and the Verdict: God Repays Both

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Abimelech's self-seized kingship collapses under the weight of God's just retribution.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that power built on bloodshed, false alliance, and self-promotion will be dismantled by the very violence it unleashed — and that no curse spoken in His name falls to the ground.

Applications (Five)

1. Self-installed authority that bypasses God's call does not merely fail — it feeds on itself until it devours its own foundation. (*Mind/Belief*) Abimelech's power was purchased with Baal's silver and secured by his brothers' blood. The very system that raised him — the Shechemites, the pagan sanctuary, the hired reckless men — became the system he had to destroy to survive. This is not coincidental irony; it is the structure of power built outside the covenant. Wherever authority is seized rather than given — in households, organizations, churches, or nations — it creates the conditions for its own collapse. The believer who understands this will not be surprised when ungodly power structures devour themselves; they will be warned against participating in them.

2. Complicity in unjust power makes its consequences your own. (*Mind/Belief*) The chapter's double verdict (vv. 56–57) is searching: God repaid Abimelech *and* the men of Shechem. The Shechemites did not merely suffer from Abimelech's choices — they shared in his guilt because they funded him, crowned him, and preferred ethnic loyalty to covenant righteousness. The temple of Baal-Berith funded the fratricide; its people died in its ruins. The reader is asked a quiet but urgent question: whose rise am I subsidizing? What am I funding with my endorsement, my silence, my money, or my reputation?

3. Let the bramble parable awaken grief that Israel's hunger for the wrong kind of king runs through every human heart. (*Affections/Worship*) The olive, fig, and vine were too

fruitful — too genuinely productive — to leave their work for the vanity of ruling. Only the bramble, which produces nothing and shelters no one, was willing to be king. Jotham's fable is not only political analysis; it is spiritual diagnosis. The heart that craves recognition, dominance, and the prerogatives of power rather than the quiet productivity of faithful service is the bramble heart. Sit with this long enough to feel its indictment. Then bring it to the King who came not to be served but to serve and give His life — the only King who was genuinely fruitful enough to be king and chose to reign from a cross instead of a throne.

4. Trust that God's spoken word — including His warnings and His curses — does not evaporate into history unfulfilled. (*Affections/Worship*) Jotham fled after delivering his curse. He had no army, no plan, and no visible mechanism for justice. Three years passed in apparent impunity. Then the evil spirit came, and everything Jotham named began to unfold with terrible precision. God's word — including the uncomfortable words, the warning words, the words that seem to hang unanswered in history for years — does not fall to the ground. The believer who lives in a moment that looks like Abimelech's three stable years — where wickedness seems to flourish and curses seem forgotten — is being called to the same trust Jotham exercised in fleeing and waiting: God has said what He has said.

5. Examine whether the platform you are building is funded by sources that will one day require you to burn them. (*Will/Behavior*) Abimelech took the silver of Baal-Berith to fund his ambition, and he burned Baal-Berith's temple to survive his ambition. The source of the funding became the first casualty of the machine it created. This is a concrete and actionable warning about the alliances, financial dependencies, and reputational compromises that ambition requires. What have you accepted from sources that are incompatible with your stated commitments? What would you have to destroy eventually if you continued on your current trajectory? Abimelech's story is an invitation to audit the foundations before the evil spirit arrives.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Judges 9 is a sustained demonstration of God's retributive justice operating through historical process. God does not intervene with a theophany or a judge — He sends an evil spirit of discord and lets the machinery of Abimelech's own violence execute the sentence Jotham pronounced. This teaches that God's justice is not limited to dramatic interventions; it is woven into the moral fabric of history itself. The chapter also demonstrates the inviolability of the divine word: Jotham's curse was not a private wish but a covenantal speech act that bound the future. The narrator's closing verdict — “God returned” — is a theological statement about divine memory, covenant keeping, and the inexorable fulfillment of what God has said. The 70 brothers who died on one stone cry out, and God hears — even when no human avenger arises.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Judges 9 enacts the Reformed conviction that God governs all things — including evil agents and evil spirits — in the service of His just purposes, without Himself becoming the author of sin. The evil spirit God sent does not create the Shechemites' treachery; it removes the restraint that had suppressed it and allows it to manifest for judgment. This is classic Reformed providence: God's ordaining will operating through secondary causes, including evil ones. The chapter also functions as a negative exhibit of the Deuteronomic covenant principle — blessing for obedience, curse for rebellion — worked out not in abstract doctrine but in political blood and burning rubble. Israel had not wanted the LORD as their king (8:23 is the textual hinge); Gideon refused kingship but failed to prevent its emergence in his own household. Abimelech is the covenant curse made concrete. For preaching, this grounds applications not in bare moralism ("don't be like Abimelech") but in the gospel logic of a better King: Christ alone builds His kingdom without bloodshed or Baal-Berith's silver — and His kingdom, unlike Abimelech's, will not be dismantled.

Main Takeaway

Power seized without God's call — bought with the currency of false gods and cemented in blood — is not merely fragile; it is already condemned. Abimelech didn't stumble into bad luck; he walked into a curse that God remembered and administered down to the millstone. Stop building what God hasn't authorized. And if you have been complicit in someone else's Abimelech — if you gave the silver — you are not a neutral bystander in what follows.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the chapter to a leadership lesson about "toxic leaders."** Judges 9 is frequently mined for observations about organizational dysfunction, bad leadership selection, and the dangers of charismatic but ruthless leaders. These observations are not wrong but they are catastrophically insufficient. The chapter is not a case study in leadership pathology — it is a theological statement about divine retribution, covenantal curse, and the kingship of God. Preaching it as leadership wisdom domesticates a text that is meant to produce holy fear, not management insight.
- **Ignoring the Shechemites' guilt and preaching only Abimelech as villain.** The narrator's double verdict in vv. 56–57 is deliberate. A sermon that makes Abimelech the sole subject leaves untouched the chapter's most searching application: the people who chose him, funded him, and crowned him bear their own guilt. The congregation almost certainly contains people who are more Shechemite than

Abimelech — complicit bystanders, not primary perpetrators. The text addresses them directly.

- **Treating Jotham's fable as an anti-monarchical political manifesto.** Jotham is not making a constitutional argument against all kingship. He is making a covenantal argument against *this* king, whose rise was illegitimate. Preaching the fable as a general critique of political power misses its specific thrust and imports an anachronistic political framework. The text is asking about *this* king's legitimacy, not resolving a debate about forms of government.
- **Preaching the chapter without connecting to the kingship of Christ.** Judges 9 is the nightmare version of kingship that the canon resolves only in Christ. The bramble who cannot shelter becomes the contrast to the King whose yoke is easy and whose reign is life. A sermon that ends with "don't be an Abimelech" has stopped preaching Judges 9 too early — it has given law without gospel, diagnosis without remedy. The chapter must arrive at the King who was not elected by Baal's silver or established by a brother's blood.
- **Glossing over the violence to reach the application faster.** The millstone, the burning tower, the thousand dead, the salted ruins — these are not decorative details. The chapter is meant to be disturbing. Smoothing the violence to make the text more accessible robs it of the very weight that makes God's justice feel real. Preachers should let the text's darkness do its work. The discomfort is the point.
- **Missing the irony of the Baal-Berith temple as both funding source and funeral pyre.** The silver that purchased Abimelech's rise came from the house of El-Berith/Baal-Berith. The people who sheltered in that same house died when Abimelech burned it. This is the text's most concentrated theological statement: the false god that funded the wickedness could not protect its own worshippers from the instrument it created. Any sermon on this chapter that does not pause on this irony has missed the text's own theological punctuation mark.