



"Prometheus the Firebringer" is one of the greatest of the Greek myths. It is the story of the immortal who so loved mankind that he defied Zeus and endured endless torture in order that Man might have the gift of fire. This story exemplifies more than an origin myth, for Prometheus symbolises the questioning mind. The young Greek hero is the one individual who dared to question and challenge the very laws of the omnipotent Zeus.

There was a time when there were no gods. Heaven and Earth alone existed. They were the first parents, and from their union sprang the gigantic Titans. For ages the Titans ruled the world. But at last the gods, who were the children of the Titans, rebelled and overthrew them. Then it was that Zeus became supreme ruler of the universe and his wife and sister, Hera, became queen of heaven.

Now as yet there were no men on earth, and none of the animals seemed worthy to rule the rest. So the gods decided to make still another kind of creature. One of the Titans, Prometheus – whose name means Forethought – was chosen for the task.

Down from heaven the Titan sped. He took clay and mixed it with water, kneaded it, and shaped it in the likeness of the gods. He made his creature stand upright, for he wanted man to look up at the stars and not down on the earth, like the animals. Then Prometheus thought, "What gifts shall I give this work of my hands to make him superior to the rest of creation?"

Unfortunately his brother Epimetheus – which means Afterthought – had already given all the great gifts to the animals. Strength and courage, cunning and speed – he had distributed them all. Wings, claws, horns, scales, shelly covering – nothing was left for man.

Then quick-witted Prometheus thought of fire. Oh, great and wonderful gift! "With fire," the Titan thought, "man can make weapons and subdue the

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beasts, forge tools, plow the earth, and master the arts. What matter that my creature has neither fur nor feathers, scales nor shell? Fire will warm his dwelling, and he need fear neither rain nor snow nor the wild north wind."

Back to heaven Prometheus sped, lit his torch at the chariot of the sun, brought down fire to man, and went away rejoicing.

But up on high Olympus, great Zeus frowned as he sat with the gods, feasting on nectar and ambrosia. For Zeus was ever jealous of his power.

"This creature that looks to heaven is truly more than a match for the beasts," he thought. "Indeed, he is almost a match for the gods. But I will curb his ill-got power."

Straightway Zeus made woman, lovely as a goddess. All the immortals bestowed gifts upon her to make her yet more captivating. And they called her Pandora – Gift-of-all. When she was finished, Zeus himself bore the dazzling creature to the Titans.

"Beware!" Prometheus cautioned his brothers. "I fear the gifts of wily Zeus. He bears me ill will because of the fire I stole from heaven and brought down to mankind."

But Epimetheus was enchanted with Pandora and took her to his heart and home.

Now in that home Epimetheus had a jar in which he kept certain gifts he had not distributed among the animals. He took great pains to tell Pandora she must leave this jar alone. "On no account must you open it," he warned her.

But above all things else, the gods had endowed Pandora with curiosity. No sooner was she alone than she sped to the forbidden jar.

"Surely it will do no harm if I just peek in and see what is there," thought she.

She slipped off the cover. And there flew out a host of evil plagues and all manner of diseases, Envy, Spite, Revenge – and scattered themselves far and wide. Pandora clapped on the lid. But it was too late. The jar

was all but empty. Only Hope had remained – Hope which never leaves mankind.

There was no danger now that man would rival the gods – he had enemies far worse than wild beasts to contend with. But still Zeus could not forgive Prometheus.

"The thief who stole heaven's fire shall be punished as his love of man deserves!" Zeus declared. "He shall be chained to the highest rock of Mount Caucasus – where man can never climb. Scorched by the sun, he shall lie and groan. And I shall cause a vulture to prey upon his liver, which shall grow again as fast as it is devoured."

He summoned Hephaestus. And high on the mountain, where eagles make their home, heaven's lame smith – all unwilling – riveted the Titan to the rock. There Prometheus hung in his chains. But he neither groaned nor besought pity, neither regretted what he had done nor bent his knee before the tyrant. The rock, the vulture, and the chain – all that the proud can feel of pain – he endured, and showed his agony to none.

1. What does Prometheus's name mean?
2. Why does he give the humans fire?
3. Why did Zeus dislike this?