

In Greek mythology, the gods are seen as great and powerful beings. However, they are given human qualities and interact with humans, also known as mortals, a great deal. They help mortals win contests, they fall in love with mortals, and they even save mortals from monsters. Mythology makes it seem like humans would be lost without the gods. This is especially apparent in the tale of Prometheus. In Greek mythology, Prometheus is not only seen as a great supporter of humans, but he is also responsible for their appearance and survival in the world.

### The Great Titan

Prometheus, who was named for his gift of forethought, was a wise Titan. In Greek mythology, the Titans were the sons and daughters of the earth and sky, Gaea and Uranus. They ruled over the earth before Zeus and the Olympians overthrew their father, the Titan ruler, Cronus. Even though the Titans were older than Zeus, they were not more powerful. Zeus banished the Titans to the darkness of a region called Tartarus so that they would not interfere with the Olympians' rule over the earth. Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus were allowed their freedom because they did not fight in the Titan-Olympian war.

Prometheus, whose name means “foresight,” and Epimetheus, whose name means “hindsight,” were told to give characteristics to all the living things on the earth. Epimetheus gave gifts generously. He gave fish the ability to breathe in water. Epimetheus gave lions strength, and mice resourcefulness to help them survive despite their small size. Then the gods asked the brothers to create another creature, one that could have understanding and reason. By this point, all the best gifts had been assigned to the other animals. They were fast, covered in warm fur, and had keen senses. What was left for man?



Prometheus steals fire from the chariot of the sun and delivers it to humans.

### The Greatest Gifts

Prometheus gathered clay from the earth and formed a man. He wanted humans to have great power, so he made them look like the gods. They also walked on two legs instead of on all fours like all the other animals. The goddess Athena breathed life into the clay, and a man was created.

Prometheus had formed man, but Epimetheus, without thinking it through, already had given out all the good traits to the other animals. Man did not have the strength of a lion or the ability to fly through the air like a bird. He could not even swim underwater for very long like a fish. Prometheus decided that in order for men to be strong, they needed fire. It is said that as men sat around fire and watched smoke rise to the heavens, they began to think about all things in life. Thus the gift of fire also led to the gift of intelligence.

Zeus approved of the creation of humans. However, he wanted humans to always be below the gods. To remind humans of their lesser status, he ordered man to make animal sacrifices as a way to honor the gods. Even though Prometheus did not fight against Zeus in the Titan war, he did not like Zeus very much. After all Zeus had fought his family and banished them to a horrible place. Prometheus felt protective of his creation and wanted to protect humans from the gods. He also did not want the humans to always have to give the best meat from the animal sacrifice to the gods. So, when the ceremony for animal sacrifice was being established, Prometheus hid good meat under animal skins and hid bones under a thin layer of fatty, juicy meat. Zeus selected the pile of bones, and thereafter humans were allowed to keep the good meat for themselves. Zeus was furious that he had been tricked. To punish Prometheus Zeus took fire away from humans.

Prometheus was angry at Zeus because he had taken away his great gift to man. He saw his creations shivering in the dark cold and took pity on them. Prometheus snuck up to Mount Olympus and lit a torch from a spark off of the chariot of the sun. He raced back to earth and gave the torch to man.

### **The Revenge of the Gods**

Zeus was angry that Prometheus had returned fire to man. He went to the god of fire and crafting, Hephaestus, and asked him to help get revenge on Prometheus for deceiving him not once, but twice. Zeus had a plan that would bring about the downfall of humanity.

Acting on Zeus's instructions, Hephaestus created a woman. She was given the face of an immortal goddess, the features of a young girl, and a sweet human voice. Athena breathed life into her and dressed her in silver clothes. The god Hermes gave the being a lying tongue and deceptive personality. She was also assigned, as one of her defining traits, a curious mind. Finally, she was given a box and told not to open it. Zeus named the woman Pandora and sent her to Prometheus as a bride.

Because of Prometheus's gift of forethought, he knew that Zeus was trying to trick him into marrying Pandora. He sent her away and told his brother that if he met Pandora, he should turn away and run, but Epimetheus did not have Prometheus's gift. Zeus sent Pandora to Epimetheus, and he was blinded by her beauty and words. He allowed her to stay.

Pandora still had the box she was forbidden to open, but curiosity was getting the best of her. Because she was good at being deceptive, she believed that Zeus would not know if she peeked in the box. When she finally did open it, all the evil, sorrow, and plagues of the world were released. Man now suffered, which caused Prometheus to suffer as well. At the bottom of the box, however, was hope, and Pandora had slammed the lid on the box just in time to trap it there, where it remained protected from the evils of the world. So, in spite of all the terrible things that were unleashed from Pandora's box, there is always hope that life will be better.

### **The Final Punishment**

Even though Zeus had his revenge on humans, he was not satisfied. He wanted to make Prometheus suffer more for favoring humans over the gods. Zeus captured Prometheus and chained him to a rock in the Caucasus Mountains. Each day a giant eagle would attack Prometheus and eat his liver. At night Prometheus's body would heal completely, and the same thing would happen the next day. Zeus doomed Prometheus to this punishment forever unless Prometheus used his gift to tell Zeus which of his children would overthrow him. If he refused to tell him, Prometheus's only hope would be to have an immortal sacrifice his life for Prometheus and a mortal kill the eagle that tortured him.



In this famous statue on display at Rockefeller Center, Prometheus is seen descending from Mount Olympus encircled by the ring of Zodiac.

In some versions of the myth, Prometheus is freed when the immortal Chiron the Centaur agrees to die for him and the hero Heracles kills the great eagle. In others versions Prometheus fades into the rocks of the Caucasus Mountains. In both versions, however, he never gives in to Zeus.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** What is the initial reason that Prometheus does not like Zeus?
  - A.** Zeus does not allow him to marry Pandora.
  - B.** Zeus tricks his brother into eating a poisoned apple.
  - C.** Zeus refuses to allow Prometheus to sit on Olympus.
  - D.** Zeus imprisoned Prometheus's family in Tartarus.
  
- 2.** In what way is Prometheus a protector of humankind?
  - A.** He builds a wall around their home.
  - B.** He gives them fire to help them survive against the elements.
  - C.** He breathes life into them.
  - D.** He gives them hope.
  
- 3.** Why was Epimetheus not able to send Pandora away like Prometheus did?
  - A.** Epimetheus had the gift of hindsight, not foresight.
  - B.** Epimetheus was lonely after Prometheus was chained up.
  - C.** Zeus put a spell on Epimetheus, so he was forced to accept her.
  - D.** Epimetheus had a fight with his brother and kept her to hurt him.
  
- 4.** Review the myth of Prometheus. What elements of the myth remind you of other creation stories? Use details from the passage to support your answer.