

Myths and Legends: The story of Prometheus and Pandora's box

By James Baldwin, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.07.16

Word Count **962**

Level **1040L**

"TOP: Illustration of scene from Prometheus Bound" by Aeschylus, 19th Century. MIDDLE: Prometheus brings fire to mankind. BOTTOM: This is an engraving of Pandora trying to close the box that she had opened out of curiosity. At left, the evils of the world taunt her as they escape. This engraving is based on a painting by F. S. Church, from the 19th century. Getty Images

Greek mythology evolved thousands of years ago. There was a need to explain natural events, disasters and events in history. Myths were created about gods and goddesses that had special powers and human feelings. These ideas were passed down in beliefs and stories.

How Fire Was Given To Men

Long ago, there lived two brothers who were not like other men, nor were they like the gods who lived on Mount Olympus. They were the sons of one of the Titans who had fought against Zeus and were sent in chains to the underworld.

The name of the older brother was Prometheus, or Forethought, for he was always thinking of the future. The younger was called Epimetheus, or Afterthought, for he was always busy thinking of the past.

For some reason, Zeus had not sent these brothers to prison with the rest of the Titans.

Prometheus did not care to live in the clouds with the gods. He was too busy making plans to improve the world of men, hoping to make it wiser and better than it had ever been before.

He went out to live among men and help them, for he was sad that they were no longer as happy as they had once been. He found them living in caves and holes in the Earth, shivering with cold because there was no fire.

What I Desire Is The Gods' Red Fire

Prometheus visited Zeus and begged the king of the gods to give fire to men, so that they might have a little comfort through the long months of winter. But Zeus refused, saying that if men became powerful they would rise up against the gods.

Prometheus walked away in silence. As he was passing by the seashore he found a tall reed, which he took and carried to the place of the sun in the far east. Prometheus touched the end of the long reed to the flames of the sun, and the reed caught fire and burned slowly like a candle.

He called some of the shivering men from their caves and built a fire for them, and showed them how to build other fires from the coals. Soon there was a cheerful blaze in every home in the land. Men and women gathered around the flames and were warm and happy, and thankful to Prometheus for the wonderful gift he had brought to them from the sun.



How Diseases And Troubles Came Among Men

Things might have gone on very happily indeed, had it not been for Zeus. But one day, when he happened to look down upon the Earth, he saw the fires burning, and this made him very angry.

Zeus decided to punish Prometheus, but not immediately. He made up his mind to punish mankind first, and he thought of a plan for doing so in a very strange way.

He ordered his blacksmith Hephaestus to take a lump of clay and mold it into the form of a woman. Zeus gave the body life, and the other gods gave her beauty, a pleasant voice, good manners and a kind heart. Lastly, one of the gods gave her curiosity. Then they called her Pandora, which means the all-gifted, because she had received gifts from them all.

Pandora was so beautiful and gifted that no one could help loving her. When the gods had admired her for a time, they gave her to Hermes, and he led her down the mountain to the place where Prometheus and his brother were working for the good of mankind.

"Epimetheus, here is a beautiful woman, whom Zeus has sent to you to be your wife," Hermes said.

What's In The Box?

Epimetheus took her home to live with him, and Pandora was very happy there. She had brought with her a golden box, which Zeus had given her, and which he had told her held many precious things. But wise Athena, the queen of the air, had warned her never to open it, nor look at the things inside.

One day her curiosity got the best of her, and Pandora decided to peep inside the box. All at once there was a whirring, rustling sound, and out flew 10,000 strange creatures. They fluttered for a little while about the room, and then flew away to the homes of men, bringing diseases and troubles. Ever since that day they have been flitting and creeping over all the land, bringing pain and sorrow and death.

Luckily, Pandora trapped the last creature, Foreboding, inside the box. If Foreboding had gone out into the world, people would have known from childhood all the troubles they would face in their lives. They would never have had any joy or hope.



How The Friend Of Men Was Punished

The next thing that Zeus did was punish Prometheus for stealing fire from the sun. He sent two of his servants to seize the bold Titan and carry him to the highest peak of the Caucasus Mountains. Then he sent the blacksmith Hephaestus to bind him with iron chains and tie him to the rocks.

And so the great friend of men, who had given them fire and shown them how to live, was chained to the mountain peak. He hung there with the storm winds whistling around him, and fierce eagles shrieking in his ears and tearing at his body.

Ages passed, and at last a great hero named Heracles came to the land of the Caucasus. In spite of Zeus' thunderbolts and fearful storms of snow and sleet, he climbed the rugged mountain peak. With a mighty blow, he broke the chains of Prometheus and set the grand old hero free.

From "Old Greek Stories" by James Baldwin, published in 1895.

Quiz

- 1 Why did Zeus refuse Prometheus' request to provide humans with fire?
 - (A) He was angry because Prometheus wanted to live on earth.
 - (B) He did not believe that gods should associate with humans.
 - (C) He was worried that humans would try to fight the gods.
 - (D) He felt that humans should have to suffer on earth.

- 2 How did Zeus punish humans after Prometheus taught them how to make fire?
 - (A) He caused fearful storms of thunderbolts, snow, and sleet.
 - (B) He took Prometheus away from mankind and left him on top of a mountain.
 - (C) He created Pandora, and married her to Epimetheus instead of Prometheus.
 - (D) He created Pandora, whose curiosity caused the release of many troubles.

- 3 Read the sentence from the section "What's In The Box?"

Ever since that day they have been flitting and creeping over all the land, bringing pain and sorrow and death.

Which two words could BEST replace "flitting" and "creeping" in the sentence above?

- (A) darting and crawling
 - (B) scaring and bothering
 - (C) startling and disturbing
 - (D) flashing and scrambling
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- 4 Read the sentence from the section "How Diseases And Troubles Came Among Men."
- Pandora was so beautiful and gifted that no one could help loving her.*

How does the phrase "no one could help loving her" affect the tone of the sentence?

- (A) It conveys the value of the gifts Pandora received from the gods.
- (B) It conveys the power Pandora possessed.
- (C) It conveys Pandora's irresistible charm.
- (D) It conveys the despair that Pandora would soon encounter.