

PROMETHEUS

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

Below is a list of words that appear in the story. Read the list and get to know the words before you start the story.

awe—fear and wonder
coax—urge
commerce—trade; business
deceptive—misleading; false
defied—challenged or disobeyed
descent—a movement or journey downward
destined—certain; predecided
devour—gobble up; eat
fleets—groups (especially ships)
hovered—waited (especially at one place in the air)
humility—modesty; freedom from pride
provocation—cause or reason
rebellious—unwilling to obey
reliant—dependent
scavenge—search or dig for
soothed—calmed; comforted
stern—strict; harsh
tactic—plan; approach
tend—watch over; care for
unmercifully—without pity; cruelly

PROMETHEUS

According to one Greek myth, the early days of human life were rough indeed. In those days, the young race needed plenty of help. But who would dare offer aid when mighty Zeus, the king of gods, forbid it? In the end, only one brave god stepped forward. But for that courageous act, he paid a great price.

Prometheus followed the steep path to his favorite spot at the top of Mt. Olympus.¹ Then the Titan² carefully crawled out on a ledge and peered over.

He couldn't see a thing. Sheets of rain pounded the earth below. Prometheus had felt almost certain they wouldn't be out on a day like this. Yet he wanted to make sure they were safe.

Prometheus pictured them crouched in their caves—cold, wet, and scared. They were probably hungry, too. He wanted to help them. He would do anything for them if he could. He loved those creatures—the creatures called humans.

¹(prō mē' thūs or prō mē' thē us) (ō lim' pus)
²(tī' tan) As told in the previous story, Titans were one of the oldest races of gods. Most were imprisoned after losing a war against Zeus and his brothers and sisters. Prometheus was allowed to remain free because he aided Zeus.



Perhaps Prometheus loved the human race so much because he had created them. From a mix of earth and water, he had molded human shapes in the image of the gods. Then he blew the breath of life into those bodies. Finally he set humankind free to roam the earth.

But life on earth was not so easy for this new race. They were under the constant watch of Zeus,³ the god of the sky.

Zeus was a great provider, but he was also a stern punisher. He gave humans wild beasts to eat. But he also threw mighty thunderbolts when he felt humans were acting too proud. If humankind didn't pray to Zeus and fear his power, he would destroy them.

Zeus also teased humans **unmercifully**. When he grew bored, he would sometimes amuse himself by scaring humans. He'd drop the biggest rainstorm he could gather. Or he'd split a few huge trees with lightning bolts.

Prometheus hated to see the young race forced to live under these conditions. He wanted them to be able to see in the dark and not fear it. He wanted them to realize the power of their own minds. To be forever **reliant** on the gods and at their mercy was a terrible fate.

As Prometheus watched from his ledge, the rain suddenly stopped. "Zeus must have gotten tired of his silly games," thought Prometheus.

He stood up and brushed off his robe. A chilly wind blew through him. Winter was on its way, with its cold blasts. His beloved humans couldn't last another season without fire.

Prometheus finally left the cold cliff and went home. But all that night he tossed and turned, worrying. What could he do? By morning light, he knew. He went to talk to Zeus.

The powerful god did not take Prometheus' request well. "Absolutely not!" he roared. "Give humans fire? Why? They're happy without it."

"You call that happy?" Prometheus protested as he pointed below. "Look at them! They're cold and unclothed.

They have few weapons with which to kill beasts or protect themselves. What little food they can **scavenge**, they must eat raw. And they lose their way in the dark! Would you wish for such a *happy* life, Zeus?"

Zeus snorted. "Prometheus, you're supposed to be so wise. Don't you know that humans would become miserable with fire? Each gift comes at a price. That is fate. If I gave humans fire, they'd create more weapons. Then they'd begin a system of **commerce**. Soon one human would have more than the next. Envy and greed would be born, and wars would follow."

Zeus shook his head. "No, leave the humans to me, Prometheus. I know what's best."

Zeus turned his back on Prometheus. As far as the mighty god was concerned, the discussion had closed.

But Prometheus wasn't willing to give up so easily. He stepped in front of Zeus and tried another **tactic**.

"Of what purpose is this human race if they are to live like beasts?"

Zeus answered impatiently. "So they can worship us, Prometheus. *That* is why I allowed you to create them. To offer us sacrifices. Though as you well know, they get the best of that bargain!"

This last thought caused Zeus to glare at Prometheus. He still recalled Prometheus' part in the division of the sacrifices. Long ago a meeting had been held to decide how sacrifices should be shared. When an animal was killed, it was understood that part should be offered to the gods. But which part?

Prometheus had volunteered to help decide the question. "I'll divide the meat into portions," he said. As Zeus stared suspiciously, Prometheus hastily added, "Then you, of course, shall choose the gods' share."

Zeus was right to be suspicious. Prometheus had cleverly gathered the rich meat from an ox and wrapped it in some tough hide. But as for the bones, he hid them in a tempting

³(Zūs)

layer of fat. Then he invited Zeus to choose which share the gods desired. Zeus picked the **deceptive** bundle of fat and bones.

Then how the heavens shook when Zeus discovered the trick! No, Zeus wouldn't soon forget or forgive Prometheus' plan. In fact, since that time Zeus had angrily denied humans most comforts. Especially fire.

Now Prometheus quickly tried to change the subject. He decided to appeal to Zeus' anger instead of his good will. "But great lord of the sky, wouldn't humans be much more amusing with fire?" the Titan suggested. "Imagine them blundering into the flames. Or how frightened they would be at the sight of their own shadows. Think of the endless possibilities."

Zeus smiled. He knew Prometheus was trying to trick him. "Fire might make humans more amusing," he replied. "But it would surely make them more dangerous. You may have noticed a few of their worst qualities. Pride, for one. They need very little **provocation** to become boastful toads. If we give them fire. . . . Well, forget about **humility** or devotion. With fire, they'll think they're gods. They might even try to take over Olympus."

Zeus frowned at the thought. "Dangerous, indeed. Perhaps I'll just squash this human race before they even get such ideas. Maybe then your loyalties will return to the gods, where they belong."

Prometheus started to protest, but Zeus angrily shook his head. "No more! I will not allow you to give your precious humans fire! Now be gone, Prometheus."

With that, Zeus stormed out of the room. Prometheus guessed he was probably on his way to brew more rain clouds. Prometheus remained standing where he was, deep in thought. He knew humans had no future on earth without fire. So there was only one thing to do.

That night Prometheus crept into an empty hall on Olympus. In this hall, the gods' central fire blazed.

Quietly, Prometheus pulled out a hollow reed. After a quick glance around, he reached into the fire and brought out a coal.

"A jewel fit for my humans," Prometheus whispered to himself. Carefully the **rebellious** god placed the nugget inside the reed.

Before leaving, Prometheus took one last look at Olympus. He knew he'd never be allowed back. Then he turned and began his **descent** to earth.

A god moves with the swiftness of thought. So in several moments, Prometheus touched ground. Then he began his search.

The Titan soon found what he was looking for. At the entrance to a cave, he stopped and knelt in the sand. As the night winds peered curiously over his shoulder, Prometheus dug a shallow pit. Then he gathered dry brush from around the cave and put it in the pit. Finally he topped the brush with a few pieces of wood.

By this time, a few shadowy figures had appeared at the mouth of the cave. They did not speak. They simply watched in **awe**.

"The bed is ready," Prometheus murmured. "Now for my sleeping coal."

So saying, Prometheus took his reed and split it apart. The red coal fell into the pit. Instantly a tiny flame rose.

Prometheus leaned down and blew softly on the young fire. The flames grew fatter, snapping as they widened. Finally a circle of light surrounded Prometheus and his friends.

Prometheus glanced up and smiled at the humans. He gestured for them to come closer.

One by one they came out of the cave and crouched by the fire. But when they felt its great warmth, they jumped back in alarm.

"Don't be frightened," Prometheus **soothed** them. "This is called fire. Sit at just the right distance and it will keep back the cold without burning you."

The humans moved back to the fire and whispered quietly among themselves.

"Now to show you its other powers," Prometheus said. "Aha!" he exclaimed as he spotted a freshly killed deer at the cave entrance. "Tonight you shall dine like the kings you will be!"

Prometheus cut a piece of the meat and placed it on a stick over the flame. The hungry flames cracked and smacked as the fat oozed down. The humans were hungry, too. Prometheus could see their mouths watering.

When the meat was finished cooking, the god held it out to them. A tall man took the hot meat and bit it eagerly.

"Abhhhhh!" he screamed in pain. As Zeus had warned, gifts come at a price. The man had burned his tongue.

Prometheus quickly calmed the startled humans. "This fire can change your whole life. But you must learn how to **tend** it. You must feed it many twigs or it will die. But don't feed it too much or it will **devour** everything in sight. Even you! If it escapes your circle, throw water on it. Fire fears water and will fade at its touch."

Prometheus pulled the man eating the deer meat into the circle. He showed the man how to start a fire and **coax** it into flames. Soon the second fire had grown to a healthy golden blaze.

The man smiled at Prometheus.

That night and for many others, Prometheus went from cave to cave. Everywhere he went, he carried a live coal and the secret of fire. Finally every human knew how to light, feed, and put out a fire.

Prometheus also passed on other gifts to the young race. He showed humans the mysteries of writing, healing, shipbuilding, metalworking, and animal herding.

All went well until one day when Zeus spotted tiny lights on the earth below. He took a closer look and noticed humans cooking their food with fires. He saw huts, farmhouses, and villages. He saw blacksmith shops. He saw people clothed in skins and wool. He saw fields of corn and

fleets of boats. He saw warriors holding spears and riding in chariots, just like gods.

Zeus was furious. "By the heavens, I can guess who's responsible for this!" he bellowed. "Well, Prometheus, if man wants fire so much, I'll give him fire!"

Zeus raised his mighty arm. He was fully prepared to set the whole earth ablaze.

Then a thought struck him, and he lowered his arm. "No," he said to himself. "I'll have my revenge. And I'll have my entertainment, too. Humans will destroy themselves with this new-found gift. It will make for a long, amusing game." Zeus smiled grimly.

"But as for you, Prometheus . . . It is time for your little tricks to come to an end!"

Zeus clapped his hands and two huge guards appeared at his side. Zeus instructed them to find the rebellious Prometheus and take him to the Caucasus⁴ Mountains. Then Zeus summoned his son, Hephaestus.⁵

Hephaestus limped into his father's presence. "Yes, Father?" he asked. "You sent for me?"

Zeus gazed at his odd son. Of all the gods, Hephaestus was the only one who wasn't beautiful. In fact, Hephaestus was ugly and crippled.

Yet the gods respected Hephaestus' skills. He was the best metalworker in the universe. He'd created shields, armor, jewelry—even lifelike figures that moved by themselves.

But now his father had a distasteful task for him. "I need your strongest chains, Hephaestus. Chains to bind the rebel Prometheus! Fetch your tools and follow me," he ordered.

Zeus and Hephaestus set off at once for the Caucasus Mountains. There they found Prometheus under guard.

Zeus glared. "You went against my will, Prometheus," he spoke sternly. "You gave humans a secret of the gods! For that, you will be bound to this rock forever. No rest, no company, no food. Indeed, *you* will be the food!"

⁴(ko' ka sus or kaw' ka sus)

⁵(he fes' tus)

He waved his hand and a vulture appeared. The bird gave a hungry cry as it **hovered** overhead.

Zeus pointed at the sky. "Every day that vulture will tear out your liver. And every day your liver will grow back. Every day to the end of time, Prometheus. Now let your brave humans save you! If there are any around after I'm finished with them!"

Zeus vanished in a clap of thunder.

In the silence that followed, Hephaestus turned to Prometheus. "Please, my friend. I don't do this willingly, but—"

"But do it you must," Prometheus softly finished for him. "I foresaw my fate, Hephaestus. I knew what the outcome was to be. And I accepted it."

With that, the Titan stretched himself out on the rock. Hephaestus gave a mighty sigh and knelt beside him. Then the god of the forge took up his hammer, spikes, and chains and set to work.

Quietly he did his duty. Yet as he prepared to drive in the last spike, he paused. "For all eternity, Prometheus! How can I do this? How can you bear it?"

Prometheus raised his handsome head. "As I told you, Hephaestus, I foresaw this. Now I foresee an end to it as well. And Zeus himself will permit me to be freed. For I have a secret, Hephaestus. The most important secret in the universe to the great god of the sky," he said.

"A secret?" whispered Hephaestus.

But Prometheus' only answer was a smile. He wasn't going to tell anyone, including Hephaestus, about the lovely Thetis.⁶ Thetis' son was **destined** to be greater than his father, no matter who his father was. Even if Zeus were the father, Thetis' son would still be greater.

"All in good time, Hephaestus," Prometheus replied at last. "You'll know in thirty years. Or is it thirty thousand? But when the day comes that Zeus gives in, both I and the secret shall be set free."

⁶(thē' tis)

Prometheus settled back as Hephaestus drove in the last spike. Yes, he would lie here in pain for years upon years. But he had **defied** the gods and given his beloved humans a future. For despite Zeus' threats, humans would survive. Then some day, one of the greatest of them all would set him free.