

How Prometheus Gave Fire to Men

by James Baldwin

Many years ago, according to the stories told by the people of ancient Greece, there lived two brothers who were not like other men, or like the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus. They were the sons of one of the Titans who had fought against Zeus and been sent in chains to the prison of the Lower World.

The name of the elder of these brothers was Prometheus (which means Forethought). Prometheus was always thinking of the future and making things ready for what might happen tomorrow, or next week, or next year, or even in a hundred years time. The younger was called Epimetheus (which means Afterthought). Epimetheus was always so busy thinking of yesterday, or last year, or a hundred years ago, that he never worried at all about what might come to pass in the future.

Prometheus did not want to live amongst the clouds on Mount Olympus. He was too busy for that. While the gods were spending their time in idleness, drinking nectar and eating ambrosia, he was planning how to make the world wiser and better than it had ever been before.

So instead of living on Olympus, Prometheus went out amongst men to live with them and help them and he quickly noticed that they were no longer happy as they had been during the golden days when Kronos, the titan, was king. He found them living in caves and in holes of the earth, shivering with the cold because there was no fire, dying of starvation, hunted by wild beasts and by one another—the most miserable of all living creatures.

"If they only had fire," said Prometheus to himself, "they could at least warm themselves and cook their food; and after a while they could learn to make tools and build themselves houses. Without fire, they are worse off than the beasts."

Prometheus went boldly to Zeus and begged him to give fire to the people, so that so they might have a little comfort through the long, dreary months of winter.

"I will not!" said Zeus, "Not one spark will I share with them! For if men had fire they might become strong and wise like us, and after a while they would drive us out of our kingdom. Besides, fire is a dangerous tool and they are too poor and ignorant to be trusted with it. It is better that we on Mount Olympus rule the world without threat so all can be happy."

Prometheus didn't answer, but he had set his heart on helping mankind, and he did not give up. As he was walking by the seashore he found a tall stalk of fennel. He broke it off and then saw that its hollow center was filled with a dry, soft substance which would burn slowly and stay alight for a long time. He carried the stalk with him as he began a long journey to the top of Mount Olympus.

Mankind shall have fire, despite what Zeus has decided," he said to himself. And with that thought, he snuck quietly into Zeus' domain and stole a spark from Zeus' own lightning bolt. Prometheus touched the end of the long reed to the spark, and the dry substance within it caught on fire and burned slowly. Prometheus hurried back to his own land, carrying with him the precious spark hidden in the hollow center of the plant.

When he reached home, he called some of the shivering people from their caves and built a fire for them, and showed them how to warm themselves by it and use it to cook their food. Men and women gathered round the fire and were warm and happy, and thankful to Prometheus for the wonderful gift which he had brought to them.

One chilly winter evening, Zeus gazed down from Mount Olympus and noticed fires burning cheerfully at the hearths of men and women in every village across the land. It did not take him long to realize that Prometheus had disobeyed him and given fire to men.

Zeus was very angry and ordered that Prometheus be chained to the side of a mountain to suffer there for all eternity. And there Prometheus stayed, thinking of the future, happy in the knowledge that he had given fire to men until he was one day rescued by Hercules, the mortal son of Zeus... But that is a story for another day!

Source: <<http://www.dltk-kids.com/world/greece/m-story-prometheus-fire.htm>>