

Summer Price

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The Labors of Hercules

Hercules, also known as Heracles, is probably one of the most well known of Greek heroes. Being not particularly intelligent, he had the uncanny way of killing innocent bystanders along with the many he killed on purpose. Despite his short temper, he being half god was very physically strong and was always immediately willing to make up for his many mistakes. In fact, much of his life was filled with penances for his wrongdoings. He accomplished many acts considered heroic and certainly had a full and dramatic life. This written paper is only a few of the episodes in his life, but should at least give a glimpse of the heroics and tragedies of Hercules.

Having probably the most physical strength among the Greek heroes, Hercules, was literally born of deity. He was born to Zeus and Alcmene, when Alcmene's husband Amphitryon was away at war, Zeus changed into the appearance of her husband. Hera, Zeus' wife, became very jealous and was pitted against Hercules right from the beginning. Hercules started showing his extraordinary potential when he was just a baby a few weeks after he was born with his twin Iphicles. He strangled two treacherous serpents sent to kill him by Hera, and when he did this Amphitryon knew which of his two "twin sons" was really of his blood. Even though Hercules was not technically his son, he still received the birthright because he was born first and was clearly the most formidable son.

Later in life Hercules was sent to Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns, to perform ten dangerous tasks, or Labors to compensate in penance for a madness that had come on him by the envious Hera. In his terrible madness, Hercules hurled his family into a fire to burn alive. Afterward, his grief was great and he right away began to look for reparation to cleanse him from what he felt was a horrible sin even though it was not completely his fault. After consulting an oracle, he went to Eurystheus, who agreed to indefinitely enslave him and set ten very frightening tasks to complete.

The first Labor was to kill the almost invincible Nemean Lion. The lion had a two-entranced cave for his lair. Also having an impenetrable pelt, Hercules had to strangle the lion because his arrows and club had failed. He blocked one end of the cave and then cornering the lion; he jumped on to it and squeezed the life out of it. After Hercules' victory, he used the claws to skin it, and he wore the pelt as a trophy and protection, seeing as it was impenetrable. What makes this Labor even more amazing is that Hercules was only 18 when he completed this feat.

To slay the feared 9-headed hydra was the next labor for Hercules. It had lethal breath, lived in the lake of Lerna, and guarded the underwater entrance to the underworld. Hercules shot arrows into the hydra's lair to provoke it and proceeded to cut off its many heads. While doing this he soon realized that each time he cut off one of the mortal heads, two more quickly grew back. To make things even worse, Hera sent a crab to aid the hydra, which painfully bit Hercules' foot. Calling for his chariot driver Iolaus to help, he continued to cut off the heads. Iolaus seared each stump with fire quickly after each head

was cut off to prevent new heads from appearing. Finally, Hercules cut off the one immortal head and buried it safely under a big rock. After slaying the hydra, he dipped the tips of his arrows into the poisonous remains for future use that could kill instantly.

Capturing the Golden Hind was probably the longest length of time taken to complete a Labor. The beautiful Hind was sacred to the goddess Artemis and was so swift that it could outrun an arrow. Hercules tirelessly chased it for a year, and eventually caught it by carefully pinning the Hind's front legs together with an arrow without drawing blood, causing it to trip and allowed him to seize it without harming it. With this skillful shooting and blaming the capture of the Hind on Eurystheus, Artemis forgave him for capturing the sacred animal and allowed him to take and show it to Eurystheus.

After catching the Hind, Eurystheus told Hercules that the next task was to capture the vicious Erymanthian boar. On the way to Mt. Erymanthus, a centaur named Pholus entertained Hercules in his cave. Hercules then persuaded Pholus to open a common jar of the centaurs' wine. Other centaurs smelled the wine, became angry and began to attack Hercules. Hercules killed many of them and accidentally sent one of his poisoned arrows into his friend Cheiron's knee. Having driven all of the centaurs off, Hercules felt guilty and took out the arrow then Cheiron expertly dressed the wound himself, but he was still in constant agony and could not die because he was immortal. After having enough and wishing to die, Cheiron exchanged his immortality with Prometheus' mortality. At last, Hercules went to catch the boar. He pursued it until he managed to drive the boar into the thick snow, leap onto it, struggle to pin it down and tie it up. Once he finally brought it back on his shoulders, Eurystheus cowardly hid in a giant brass jar.

The fifth Labor was something different, as it did not include capturing or killing. Hercules was to clean the enormous Augean stables in one day. Filled with thousands of the finest cattle, the humongous stables of Augeas had never before been cleaned. What a mess! Augeus granted to Hercules that if he cleaned it in one day, he could have one tenth of his beautiful cattle. He promptly got right to work. He dug ditches and rerouted the rivers Alpheus and Peneus through the stables by taking down the walls. The rivers easily washed the stables clean and subsequently, pompous Hercules demanded his payment. When Augeas who, taken aback, refused to pay him, Hercules angrily argued, eventually fought, and killed him. Afterward, he took his payment, and gave the rest to Augeas' son, Phyleus, who had supported and defended Hercules and his accomplishment in court.

Removing man-eating birds that had brass feathers from the Stymphalian Marsh was the next task that Hercules had to perform. The horrifying birds would terrorize and kill men and animals by shooting their lethal feathers at victims. Hercules tried at first to chase off the crane-like birds with his arrows, but there were simply too many of the great birds to do any good. Athene, seeing Hercules at a loss of what to do next, came and gave him a brass rattle. When he shook the rattle, the Stymphalian birds with beaks that could pierce metal breastplates, were frightened and all flew up into an immense group. Now that Hercules was able to shoot their defenseless under-belly, he easily killed numerous amounts of birds as they all flew away from the marsh forever.

This is the story of how the Cretan bull came to be, whom Hercules had to capture for his next Labor. The gods had sent King Minos a sign, a magnificent bull that swam in

from the ocean that had horns of gold and spewed fire from its mouth. Instead of sacrificing it to Poseidon the sea god as was expected, he decided to keep the handsome beast and offer another in its stead. As a punishment, the bull escaped and wreaked havoc on Crete. Although Minos offered any help that he could when Hercules told him of the labor, he refused, wanting to catch the bull by himself. After a long and difficult fight, he managed to jump onto the bull, strangle it to unconsciousness by wrapping his powerful arms around its neck, and put a ring into the bulls' nose so that he could take it to Eurystheus. Eurystheus then dedicated the bull to a very reluctant Hera.

In the next labor, Hercules was to steal the four ferocious mares of the Thracian King Diomedes. Hercules recruited several friends to come help, and they then killed the servants of Diomedes and went to get the horses, involving one of his friends being eaten by one of the mares. Furious, he slowly fed Diomedes to his own bizarre horses calming them down. He easily mastered them and drove them in a chariot to Eurystheus. Lastly, Eurystheus set them free on Mount Olympus, dedicated again to Hera. Wild beasts ate the strange horses eventually causing them to dwindle.

Acquiring the girdle of Amazon Queen, Hippolyte, would have probably been the easiest Labor if it were not for Hera. When Hercules arrived and talked with the Queen, she was so impressed with Hercules' strong appearance, fell in love with him, and was ready to give him the golden girdle as a gift. During this, spiteful Hera, disguised as an Amazon, secretly told the Amazon people that Hercules and the men on his ship were here to kidnap Hippolyte. When the people started attacking, Hercules and his men were forced to fight back and kill many, fighting to get back to their ship. Tragically, Hercules

ended up accidentally killing the Queen then took the belt from her dead body before getting back to the ship. Actually considering marrying Hippolyte, Hercules was not very happy giving the girdle to Eurystheus' daughter when he returned.

Hercules then sailed to Erythia in a golden goblet, given to him by Helios and using his lion pelt as a sail to complete the tenth Labor. On the island, he was to steal the cattle from the monster and king, Geryon. Geryon had three mighty upper bodies on one pair of legs and had a two-headed watchdog. On the way to the island, Hercules cut a vast channel through the connection of Spain and Africa; the cliffs on either side from that time on were called the Pillars of Hercules. When he got there, the dog immediately attacked him, soon followed by the herdsman. He dispatched them both easily with a blow from his club. Finally, Hercules and Geryon fiercely fought until he killed him by an expertly shot arrow that he managed to shoot through all three bodies, even though Hera tried help him and blind Hercules with a shiny mirror. He then drove the beautiful red cattle back to Eurystheus.

After performing the tenth labor and returning, Eurystheus told him that he had to complete two more labors. He was required to do this because two of the previous labors did not count. The second and fifth were not done properly according to Eurystheus because of the help and work from his chariot driver Iolaus and the rivers Alpheus and Peneus. For the eleventh assignment, he had to steal the golden apples of the Hesperides, the most dangerous task yet. Hera had been given the extraordinary tree as a wedding present by Mother Earth, in which mortals could not pick the apples or they would die. An always-watchful dragon Ladon that twisted around the tree also protected it. Hercules,

having no idea where it was, had to use his wits and went to Atlas who held up the sky. He asked Atlas if he could pick three apples for him, and in the meanwhile, he would hold up the sky for him. Atlas, relieved of his burden, agreed, and when he brought back the apples, he offered to take them to Eurystheus. Recognizing that Atlas was planning to escape his original punishment of holding the sky and leaving him there, Hercules deceitfully agreed asking if he could take off the burden for a moment to get some padding to make it more comfortable. Because of Atlas's stupidity and not because Hercules was particularly smart, he consented and took the sky back from him, leaving Hercules to run away with the apples.

He executed the last and most terrible Labor in the fearsome underworld. He was to take Cerberus, Hades vicious guard dog, to Eurystheus. While he was in the underworld, he stopped to free Theseus from the Chair of Forgetfulness, which caused one to sit forever in a blank stupor. He also tried to free Peirithous from a Chair but was unable to do so. He next asked Hades if he could borrow Cerberus to take to Eurystheus for the last Labor. He told him that he could, only if he could master the three-headed dog without weapons. Hercules, protected by his lion pelt fought with the dog and choked it until it surrendered. He then carried the dog all of the way back to Eurystheus and was told to take Cerberus back immediately because of its ferocity.

Is Hercules mostly bad or good? Though Hercules many adventures do not end here, he unfortunately did not learn to control his temper much more than before. Despite his weaknesses, he certainly completed many great feats. He was prideful because of his great strength, yet he was humble enough to punish himself repeatedly for his own rash

acts by doing ridiculously frightening tasks. Though we probably will not kill anyone out of anger, are we quick to make up for our own mistakes? Did the Greeks come up with fantastic tales so that they could learn and teach? On the other hand, is it so that they can blame the gods for their own mistakes? That is the glory from learning history, so that we may learn from others mistake so that we do not have to make them ourselves.

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