



Greek mythology is full of stories of great heroes, but one of the most famous heroes is Hercules, the son of Zeus and the king of all gods. Hercules showed that he was different from other boys from the very beginning of his life. When Hercules was a baby, the goddess Hera sent two snakes to kill him. Hera had no idea that Hercules was blessed with great strength and fearlessness. He strangled the snakes before they could harm him.

Hera's anger and jealousy grew as Hercules got older. When Hercules was a young adult, Hera cast a spell on him. Hercules temporarily went crazy. Before he knew what happened, his wife and two children were dead. When he realized what he had done, Hercules was heartbroken. He went to the god Apollo for help.

"O mighty Apollo, god of truth and healing, I have done something terrible," said Hercules. "I beg of you, punish me for the evil I have done," he pleaded.

"Hercules, know that this crime was not completely your fault," replied Apollo. "Although you are the victim of a vengeful act, you must atone for what you have done. You shall be given twelve labors. If you perform them all, then your guilt will be wiped away."

These tasks would have been impossible for any mortal to complete, but Hercules was not like most other men. His first task





was to kill a ferocious lion. Hercules discovered that his arrows did nothing to harm the lion. He tracked the mighty beast to a cave and grabbed it with his strong arms. The lion frantically clawed at Hercules, but he refused to let it go no matter how much pain he felt. Like the snakes Hera had sent, Hercules strangled the lion to death.

Hercules' second task was to kill a hydra. The beast had nine heads and spewed poison. Each time Hercules cut off one of the monster's heads, two more grew back in its place! With the help of his nephew, Hercules was finally able to chop off all nine heads and kill the hydra.

For his third task, Hercules had to kill a deer. It sounds easy enough, but this was not an

ordinary deer. It had golden horns and it belonged to the goddess Diana. Hercules shot the deer and started to carry it away when Diana appeared. She was angry, but Hercules told her about his twelve labors and why he needed the deer. The goddess let Hercules take the deer so he could complete his task.

Among his other labors, Hercules wrestled a bull, captured man-eating horses, and kidnapped Cerberus, the terrifying beast that guarded the entrance to the Underworld. Through superhuman strength, courage, and perseverance, he completed all twelve labors.

Today, we use the name *Hercules* to refer to anyone who displays superhuman strength. A Herculean task is an extremely difficult job that requires great physical strength and effort. For example, swimming across the Pacific Ocean would be a Herculean task.

DID YOU KNOW?

During his life, **Hercules** endured endless hardships and challenges. When Hercules died, the gods honored and rewarded him by bringing him up to Mount Olympus to live with them.