



Many mythologies include a myth of a great flood, a punishment for evil. Prometheus had given human beings the gift of fire, a gift they violently abused. In the face of total destruction, it was Deucalion [dōō kā'lē ən], a son of Prometheus, and his wife, Pyrrha, [pir'ə] who were chosen to keep the human race alive.

■ What riddle did they need to solve?

Greek statue from the fifth century B.C. of Poseidon, god of the sea.

*Retold by
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Deucalion and Pyrrha

Now in this Iron Age,¹ Zeus visited the earth, to see whether men were as bad as they were said to be; and he came to the realm of one Lycaon,² who was King in Arcadia. Lycaon laughed, on hearing that Zeus had come, and said, "Now then, let us see if he is really a god!" So he killed an innocent man, a hostage in fact, whom he was bound to protect, and cooked his flesh, and set it before Zeus his guest, to see if he would eat it. But Zeus struck the King's house with a thunderbolt, and Lycaon fled terrified to the hills. His rough coat changed into bristling hairs all over his body. He tried to shout, and out came a snarl, for he had turned into a wolf, destined to delight in blood all the rest of his days.

Zeus called a council of the gods, and told

them what had been done; and then he declared that he thought it best to destroy mankind. The others said, "But what shall we do? There will be no one to offer sacrifices to the gods." "Never mind for that," said Zeus, "I will provide." The question then came, whether he should launch his thunderbolts on the world and set it afire; but Zeus was afraid that so great a conflagration³ might rise to the upper air, and set that also on fire, so that the Olympians themselves would be burned up.

It seemed best therefore to use water. The winds were bidden to gather the clouds; the rains descended; and the floods came and overwhelmed the whole country of Greece, so that all who dwelt there were drowned. Men and beasts, wolves and sheep, lions and tigers were carried down to the sea, and seals and dolphins swam about in the forests.

1. **Iron Age:** in mythology the most wicked age of the world, coming after the Golden, the Silver, and the Bronze Ages.

2. **Lycaon** [lī'kā'ən]

3. **conflagration** [kon'flə grā'shən]: very large fire.



But one solitary pair remained: Deucalion, a son of Prometheus, and his wife, Pyrrha, the daughter of Epimetheus. They were good people both, no one more just and no one more strict in worshiping the gods. They had got into a little chest or ark, which was in the house, and the waters carried them to the slopes of Mount Parnassus,⁴ close to the cleft where Mother Earth had an oracle. The shrine at that time was in charge of Themis,⁵ goddess of Justice, for Apollo had not yet come that way. They gave thanks to Themis, and prayed to the nymphs of that place. When Zeus saw that this innocent pair had been saved, he told Poseidon to recall his floods, and Poseidon bade his trumpeter Triton⁶ sound the recall. Triton blew a blast into his hollow shell, and the waves were stayed. Then Zeus made a great hole in the earth, and the waters all ran down, and the land began to appear. For thousands of years, this hole used to be shown in the sacred place of Olympia.

Deucalion looked around on the world, all shining with mud, and said to Pyrrha, "My wife, see, we are the whole population of the world! And the clouds are still dark above us.

4. **Parnassus** [pär nas'əs]: mountain in southern Greece sacred to Apollo and the Muses.

5. **Themis** [thē'mis]

6. **Triton** [trīt'ən]

What should I do, if I were alone? Or you, without me? Let us ask what is the will of God."

So they entered the shrine of Themis, and said, "Themis, if the anger of Zeus is satisfied, tell us how to recover the human race." And Themis said, "Go down to the plain, and cover your heads with a veil, and throw behind you your mother's bones."

They went out, and Pyrrha said to her husband, "I am afraid, my dear husband. How can we find our mother's bones? And if we could find them, would it not be wicked to disturb them?"

But Deucalion was not his father's son for nothing; he had some of his father's wisdom, and he replied, "Wife, the gods often speak in riddles. I think Themis means the bones of Mother Earth, that is, stones. Let us try them, it can do no harm to try."

Then they veiled their heads, and each of them picked up stones, and threw them behind their backs. Perhaps you will hardly believe it, but the stones as they fell took on human shapes. Deucalion's became men, and Pyrrha's became women. Even now we show traces of this origin, for we have veins in our bodies, like the veins in a piece of marble, both called by the same name; and men are called peoples, because they grew out of pebbles.

