

Hesiod – General Summary of the *Works and Days*

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. Do you want to support the Cave's mission? Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

"Let him hear the advice of Hesiod. ... The advice of Hesiod is good." — Aristotle

"Lampon ... greatly honors the sayings of Hesiod, the one he declares and recommends to his sons."
—Pindar

The Classics Cave • www.theclassicscave.com

Hesiod – General Summary of the *Works and Days*

Thanks for supporting The Classics Cave.
Please visit and support our sponsors.

The following summary comes from the Cave's
The Best of Hesiod's Theogony & Works and Days.

ONE 1-10 HYMN TO ZEUS—THE MUSES SING THROUGH HESIOD Hesiod calls upon the Muses to sing of Zeus, the god who raises a man high and lays him low, making him known or unknown. Hesiod asks Zeus for justice. As for the poet, he will speak the truth to his brother, Perses.

TWO 11-41 THE TWO STRIFES—PERSES, HESIOD'S BROTHER Hesiod tells his brother Perses about the two Strifes and encourages him to engage in the better Strife. One Strife "multiplies evil war and battle," fighting "for another man's possessions." The other is productive, rousing a man to work when he sees another one working his farm and "speeding on toward riches." The latter Strife "is good for mortal men." Hesiod calls on Perses to settle their dispute about their land and possessions with "straight justice," which comes from Zeus, rather than the judgments of "gift-greedy kings."

THREE 42-105 THE HIDDEN MEANS OF LIFE—PROMETHEUS, PANDORA, AND HUMAN MISFORTUNE Zeus is angry because Prometheus deceived him. Consequently, life is hard for human beings since the gods have hidden what it takes to live deep within the earth. Men have to work. Not only that, but thanks to Prometheus' deception

in his theft of fire, which he gave to men, Zeus has the gods make the first woman Pandora in order to counter-balance the good of fire. Prometheus' brother Epimetheus thoughtlessly receives her. Though beautiful, this "utterly irresistible deception" releases into the world the misfortunes of hard toil, painful disease, old age, and death. Hope alone remains within the great wine-jar that used to hold all these evils. Hesiod sings that no one can escape "the mind of Zeus."

FOUR 106-201 THE FIVE RACES OF HUMANKIND—THE GOLDEN, SILVER, BRONZE, HEROIC, AND IRON KINDS Hesiod tells the story of the five races or kinds of human beings. The first golden race lives a care-free life of sharing and abundance. For them, death is like falling asleep. The second silver race behaves like overgrown infants, excessively violent with one another. They refuse to honor the gods. Angry at them for their behavior, Zeus buries them in the earth. Still, they end up "blessed mortals." The third race is hardly better. Made of bronze, and building and doing everything in bronze, they battle one another and so go nameless down to Hades. Zeus tries again with the race of man-heroes, demigods (half-gods). "These were better, just, more observant of custom." Many heroes die in the Theban and Trojan wars. But Zeus preserves others, who go on to live care-free and happy lives of plenty in the Islands of the Blessed. Hesiod himself is part of the final iron race of men. He hates the Iron Age, that of his own kind, since everything is not as it should be. Work, suffering, and anxious thoughts oppress. Families break down. Might is right. Jealousy motivates. Base men are honored while good men are not. As a result, Shame and proper Indignation vanish, making their way to Olympus.

FIVE 202-212 THE HAWK AND THE NIGHTINGALE—THE CLAIMS OF POWER Hesiod tells the story of the hawk and the nightingale, in which the strong hunter claims he can do anything he wants to the weak one who is hunted.

SIX 213-285 THE TWO CITIES—ON JUSTICE AND NEEDLESS VIOLENCE Hesiod explains the difference between Justice (Dikē), with her fair and honest judgments, and needless Violence (Hubris), which relies on falsehood, crooked judgments, and force. The city, king, and man who practice justice flourish, having Peace (Eirēnē) and every good thing, whereas those who practice needless violence and merciless deeds suffer pains and punishment—hunger, plague, shrinking households. Perses should listen to Justice, the maiden daughter of Zeus, and give up on needless Violence. Likewise, gift-greedy kings should give straight judgments. To harm another is to harm oneself. Hesiod expresses the wish once again not to be part of this age. Even so, he trusts in Zeus, who gave justice to human beings. Animals do not have justice; rather, they eat one another.

SEVEN 286-335 THE EASY AND HARD PATHS—THE GOODNESS OF WORK Hesiod describes the pathway to Failure (Kakotēs) and the pathway to Success (Aretē). The one begins easy but ends hard; the other begins hard but ends easy—or easier. It is better for a man to look at the consequences of his behavior. He should also take advice. Useless is the man who doesn't think for himself or listen to counsel. Work provides what it takes to live. Laziness results in hunger. Reality—both the gods and men—smiles upon the worker, whereas it scorns the lazy man. The worker grows wealthy while the non-worker jealously grows poor. Perses should have the proper kind of shame—not that which views work as a disgrace, but the shame that avoids poverty by courageously working. Stolen property and happiness is short-lived and ultimately punished by Zeus. So too are other shameless acts against suppliant strangers, brothers, orphans, and aged fathers.

EIGHT 336-363 FEASTING WITH GODS AND MEN—FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS, GIVING AND GETTING Hesiod recommends sacrificing to the gods at night and the break of day so that the gods will be kind to Perses. When

he does so, he should be physically clean. Hesiod goes on to give advice about whom to invite to the sacrificial feast. In short, invite men who love you and are available to help you. Work on cultivating good neighbors who are a great advantage in helping you to survive and thrive, whereas bad neighbors are harmful. Do this by being friendly to those who are friendly and by giving willingly. Such giving will bring joy and delight to your heart. By contrast, shamelessly seizing things, “even if it is a small thing,” ends with a hardened, cold heart.

NINE 364-380 MAINTENANCE AND CONSUMPTION—STORES, SATISFACTION, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN Hesiod advises on how to increase (little by little) and where to keep the stores (inside the house), and when and how to be satisfied by them (relative to how full the storage jar is). He also gives counsel on what kind of working alliances to have, as well as wages, and the right sort of trust involved. He strongly cautions men about women. Finally, he recommends one child, though Zeus can prosper even a larger household. More hands mean more work, and so greater wealth.

TEN 381-617 WHEN AND HOW TO DO WHAT—THE AGRARIAN CALENDAR AND OTHER ADVICE Hesiod first reminds Perses that work leads to wealth. The gods have given work to men. So don’t, he says, procrastinate! And don’t beg others for a handout. Hunger will come to the lazy man who lives by begging—to him and his family. No, you should work. Manage your own house and farm well. For, he says, “To be well-ordered is best for mortal human beings.” Marking time with the rising and setting of various stars and other signs, Hesiod explains when to plow the fields and when to harvest. There’s a right time for everything—for cutting wood, assembling farm equipment, building shelters, winnowing grain, making wine, storing everything, and relaxing in the shade with a cup of the best wine. In short, the whole year fits together harmoniously. Even winter has its own indoor activities for the resolute man. Still, he should be properly dressed and warm when venturing outdoors—with a heavy overcoat, a long tunic, rainproof boots, and a felt hat. Hesiod recommends the sort of oxen to plow with, the right kind of men to hire, and how to properly work his slave men and women. Perses should always pray to Zeus for success.

ELEVEN 618-694 SAILING AND TRADING—TIMES AND MEASURES There’s a right time to sail. Until then, one’s ship should be properly stored ashore. Hesiod reports his father’s voyage from Aeolian Kyme to find a living in “miserable” Ascra. He goes on to admit that he’s never sailed over the sea except for when he sailed to Euboea to compete in the funeral contests celebrating Amphidamas. Nevertheless, thanks to the Muses, he can report the best times to sail and how much cargo to carry along. As for the former, Hesiod describes a summer and a spring sailing season—though he does not like the latter. Regarding how much cargo to carry, he recommends enough to make a profit but not too much so that one would lose everything if the boat sinks. “Due measure is the best in all things.”

TWELVE 695-723 RELATIONS WITH OTHERS—WIFE, FRIENDS & BROTHERS Hesiod gives advice on when and how to marry. The bride should be vetted and young so that she may learn diligence. A good wife is a boon, whereas a bad one is a disaster. Next, he says a few words about friendship and loyalty, the origins of poverty and how to treat the poor, the right use of the tongue, and how to behave at a potluck feast.

THIRTEEN 724-764 DEALING WITH THE GODS—AND OTHER MATTERS OF GRAVE CONCERN Toward the goal of not offending the gods, “to whom nights belong,” Hesiod offers advice on when and how to pour a libation (with washed hands), when and where to urinate and defecate (not facing the sun or in rivers), how to cross rivers (with washed hands and after praying), when to engender children (not after an ill-omened funeral), and

how a man should bathe (not in a woman's water)—among other choice bits of counsel. He finishes with a word on rumor, or the talk of mortals, which is god-like.

FOURTEEN 765-821 THE DAYS FROM ZEUS—THE HAPPY MAN Hesiod reveals the days from Zeus that are favorable for various tasks, births, and marriage, and the days that are unfavorable. Days vary in favorability throughout the month. Some are holy. Hesiod finally remarks on the nature of the divinely favored and happy man, and what he knows and does well.

So ends Item 11, "General Summary of the *Works and Days*." **See you in another Cave reading or item** in the Cave Library.

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave's mission?** Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

"Let him hear the advice of Hesiod. . . . The advice of Hesiod is good." —Aristotle

"Lampon . . . greatly honors the sayings of Hesiod, the one he declares and recommends to his sons."
—Pindar

The Classics Cave ▪ www.theclassicscave.com



THE CLASSICS CAVE
The earliest light for a brighter life
www.theclassicscave.com

