**Chariot of the Sun God**

The Story of Phaeton and Helios

Phaeton entered the gleaming palace of the sun god and walked to the throne room. He stopped in the doorway, blinded by the radiance of Helios, the sun god, who wore a purple robe and sat high on a throne of emeralds. Around Helios stood his attendants, whose names were Day, Month, Year, Century, Hours, Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter.

“Come to me, my boy,” said Helios, the sun god.

Phaeton stepped forward and bowed his head to shield his eyes from the sun’s awesome brightness. Then he kneeled before the throne.

“What brings you to seek your father?” Helios asked gently.

“I came to get your promise that I am really your son,” Phaeton answered. “The boys at school laugh at me and say I’m not, but my mother has always said my father is the sun.”

“Clymene is right,” said Helios. “The nymph Clymene had a child by me, and it was you. To prove I’m your father, I’ll give you anything you ask. I swear it by Styx, the river of oaths.”

“Father, I’ve only one wish. I want to do what you do early each morning. I want to drive your fiery chariot alone across the sky and turn night into day.”

“Oh, no! I cannot allow you to do that!” cried Helios.

“But you promised…”

“I spoke too rashly! Please, may the gods allow me to take back my promise!”

“It’s too late, Father!” said Phaeton.

“But this is the one wish I cannot grant, my son! The trip is too dangerous. Even Jupiter – greatest of all the gods – cannot drive my winged horses! They’re hot with fire!”

“I can drive them, Father. If I’m really your son.”

“No! You can’t! How can you fight the spin of the world? How can you fight the wild beasts and the terrible monsters?”

But Phaeton only smiled at Helios. “I know I can do what you do, Father,” he said.

The sun god tried to stall for time, but the goddess Dawn was coming quickly upon the palace, getting ready to throw open her crimson doors and to shine forth. The moon’s thin crescent had vanished from sight; the stars had taken flight. It was time for Helio’s fiery chariot to begin its daily course across the sky.

Helios and Phaeton stepped out into the cool air where the chariot waited. The gleaming cart had tires of gold and spokes of silver, and every jewel imaginable sparkled in the rosy light of the early morning.

As Phaeton walked around the golden chariot, marveling at its beauty, his father tried to think of ways to stop him from taking the terrible journey across the sky.

But when birds began singing, Phaeton cried, “I must leave now, Father!” And he jumped into the shining chariot.

The four winged horses stamped their hooves and breathed fire from their nostrils as two goddesses, both named Hours, fastened their jingling harnesses.

The sun god rubbed a magic salve on Phaeton’s face to shield him from the heat. He set his crown of flashing sunbeams on the boy’s head. Then he looked at his son and sighed. “At least listen to my advice,” he said. “Keep to the middle path. Do not veer off to the side! Neither get too high nor too low, for the sky and earth need equal heat. If you’re too high, you’ll burn the sky, and if you’re too low, you’ll burn the earth…”

“All right, Father!” cried Phaeton as he held the reins proudly, and the horses neighed and pawed the ground.

“Follow the wheel tracks of my daily path!” cried Helios. “Spare the whip and hold the reins tightly!”

“I will, Father! I will!”

“And beware of the northern bear and the twisting snake in the sky…”

Before the sun god could say more, Phaeton snapped the reins. “It’s time, Father!” he said. “Day’s calling! Night is gone!”

Suddenly the four horses leapt forward into the boundless sky.

“Don’t go, my son!” shouted Helios. “Let *me* give the world light today!”

But Phaeton couldn’t hear his father. The swift hooves of his horses ripped open the clouds. Then the winged steeds soared higher and higher into the sky.

The chariot was so light, it tossed back and forth like a ship on stormy waves. The horses grew frightened and galloped faster—until they were more swift than the East Wind. Phaeton pulled hard on the reins, but he couldn’t slow his horses down. He looked around wildly, but he couldn’t see the wheel tracks—the horses had left their worn path!

As he wheeled off course, Phaeton’s sunbeams warmed the constellations: The Snake stirred from its icy numbness. The Great Bear woke in a rage and began lumbering about the heavens.

Phaeton looked below, and when he realized how far away the earth was he became sick with fright. He called in panic for his father’s help. He yelled for his horses to stop, but the horses galloped out of control. They swept past more savage beasts in the sky—past the giant scorpion that sweated black venom as its curved stinger reached out toward the fiery chariot.

Phaeton dropped the reins, and the horses bounded into regions they’d never traveled before. They crashed into stars. All of heaven cried out in terror as the fiery chariot careened off course. The moon, the skies, and the earth all caught fire. Flames spread across mountaintops and burned the snow, spilling black smoke into the clouds. Even Mount Olympus, home of the gods, was besieged with fire.

Then Phaeton saw the earth set aflame. Everything glowed white-hot: the deserts, woodland pools, and springs. Everyone on earth was trying to escape the great fire. The gods of the underworld and even the sea nymphs in their deep ocean caves felt the searing heat.

Mother Earth shielded her hot forehead and shuddered in agony. Burdened with flame, she cried out to Zeus, the greatest of the gods: “Hurl your lightning bolts now and end this fiery death caused by Phaeton!” Then she could speak no longer, for the smoke and flames were choking her.

Zeus, hypnotized by the sight of flames licking the world, roused himself when he saw Mother Earth dying. He rolled his thunder, then lifted a giant bolt of lightning behind his head and flung it through the sky. The bolt struck the sun chariot, breaking its wheel and spokes—and fire extinguished fire, flame put out flame, and the mad horses leapt free of their harnesses as Phaeton fell from the sky.

Phaeton’s hair was on fire as he fell. Leaving behind a trail of sparks, he looked like a falling star. Far from home, half a world away from his mother, he fell into a river.

The river god held Phaeton’s poor, smoldering body and bathed his burning face. Then the water nymphs buried Phaeton; and on his tomb, they wrote:

*“Here lies Phaeton who tried to be the sun.*

*Greatly he failed, but greatly he dared.”*

For a whole day the sun god mourned his son. He refused to drive his chariot—and the men and women on earth had to burn fires to gain light and warmth.

When Zeus went to see the sun god, he found him sitting on his emerald throne with his head bowed, not moving as he sat in mourning. Zeus bid Helios to look up and answer to him for not driving his golden chariot.

But Helios cursed the god of the skies for throwing his thunderbolt and killing Phaeton.

“I had no choice!” said mighty Zeus. “the boy’s ambition nearly ended the world. Mother Earth was burning and dying. But now she is too cold, Helios. She needs your heat, or she will die from freezing.”

The sun god bowed his head further.

“Rise, Helios!” roared Zeus. “Stop blaming me for your son’s death! You have work to do! The world is waiting for you!”

The sun god heaved a great sigh, then slowly rose from his throne. Trembling with sorrow, he strode out of his palace.

The four winged horses who had leapt free from Phaeton were snuffling in the cool early air, stamping their hooves as Dawn opened her crimson doors.

The sun god stepped into the gleaming golden chariot. He put on his crown of flashing sunbeams—the same crown Phaeton had worn. Then the two goddesses of Hours yoked the four winged horses with jingling harnesses. And as the weeping sun god grabbed the reins tightly and snapped them, they bolted into the boundless, blue, sunlit sky.

Writing Journal: Answer the following questions in your Writing Journal using complete sentences.

1. Summarize the myth.
2. If you were Helios, would you have let Phaeton drive the chariot? How could Helios have weaseled his way out of the promise?
3. Who is the most responsible for Phaeton’s death? Explain.
4. What is the purpose of this myth? What does this myth explain?
5. Is there a hero of this myth? Explain.