Hercules, son of Zeus and champion of humankind, gazed in horror as he realized he had just committed the most unspeakable crime imaginable. The goddess Hera, who hated Hercules for being born of her husband's adultery, had stricken him with a temporary curse of madness and his own family were the casualties.

Consumed by grief, Hercules sought out the Oracle of Delphi, who told him the path to atonement lay with his cousin, King Eurystheus of Tiryns, a favorite of Hera's.

Eurystheus hoped to humiliate Hercules with ten impossible tasks that pitted him against invincible monsters and unfathomable forces. Instead, the king set the stage for an epic series of adventures that would come to be known as the Labors of Hercules. The first labor was to slay the Nemean Lion, who kidnapped women and devoured warriors. Its golden fur was impervious to arrows, but Hercules cornered the lion in its dark cave, stunned it with a club, and strangled it with his bare hands. He found no tool sharp enough to skin the beast, until the goddess Athena suggested using one of its own claws.

Hercules returned to Tiryns wearing the lion's hide, frightening King Eurystheus so much that he hid in a wine jar. From then on, Hercules was ordered to present his trophies at a safe distance. The second target was the Lernaean Hydra, a giant serpent with many heads. Hercules fought fiercely, but every time he cut one head off, two more grew in its place. The battle was hopeless until his nephew Iolaus thought to cauterize the necks with fire, keeping the heads from regrowing.

The dead serpent's remains became the Hydra constellation. Instead of slaying a beast, Hercules next had to catch one, alive. The Ceryneian Hind was a female deer so fast it could outrun an arrow. Hercules tracked it for a year, finally trapping it in the northern land of Hyperborea. The animal turned out to be sacred to Artemis, goddess of the hunt, and Hercules swore to return it.

When Eurystheus saw the hind, he demanded to keep it instead, but as soon as Hercules let go, the animal ran to its mistress. Thus, Hercules completed his task without breaking his promise. The fourth mission was to capture the Erymanthian boar, which had ravaged many fields. Advised by the wise centaur Chiron, Hercules trapped it by chasing it into thick snow. For the fifth task, there were no animals, just their leftovers.

The stables where King Augeas kept his hundreds of divine cattle had not been maintained in ages. Hercules promised to clean them in one dayif he could keep one-tenth of the livestock. Augeas expected the hero to fail. Instead, Hercules dug massive trenches, rerouting two nearby rivers to flow through the stables until they were spotless. Next came three more beastly foes, each requiring a clever strategy to defeat. The carnivorous Stymphalian birds nested in an impenetrable swamp, but Hercules used Athena's special rattle to frighten them into the air, at which point he shot them down.

No mortal could stand before the Cretan bull's mad rampage, but a chokehold from behind did the trick. And the mad King Diomedes, who had trained his horses to devour his guests, got a taste of his own medicine when Hercules wrestled him into his own stables. The ensuing feast calmed the beasts enough for Hercules to bind their mouths. But the ninth labor involved someone more dangerous than any beast, Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons. Hercules was to retrieve the belt given to her by her father Ares, the god of war. He sailed to the Amazon land of Themyscira prepared for battle, but the queen was so impressed with the hero and his exploits that she gave the belt willingly.

For his tenth labor, Hercules had to steal a herd of magical red cattle from Geryon, a giant with three heads and three bodies. On his way, Hercules was so annoyed by the Libyan desert heat that he shot an arrow at the Sun. The sun god Helios admired the hero's strength and lent his chariot for the journey to the island of Erytheia. There, Hercules fought off Geryon's herdsman and his two-headed dog, before killing the giant himself.

That should have been the end. But Eurystheus announced that two labors hadn't counted: the Hydra, because Iolaus had helped Hercules kill it, and the stables, because he'd accepted payment. And so, the hero set about his eleventh task, obtaining golden apples from the garden of the Hesperides nymphs. Hercules began by catching the Old Man of the Sea and holding the shape-shifting water-god until he revealed the garden's location.

Once there, the hero found the titan Atlas holding up the heavens. Hercules offered to take his place if Atlas would retrieve the apples. Atlas eagerly complied, but Hercules then tricked him into trading places again, escaping with apples in hand. The twelfth and final task was to bring back Cerberus, the three-headed hound guarding the underworld. Helped by Hermes and Athena, Hercules descended and met Hades himself. The lord of the dead allowed

Hercules to take the beast if he could do it without weapons, which he achieved by grabbing all three of its heads at once.

When he presented the hound to a horrified Eurystheus, the king finally declared the hero's service complete. After 12 years of toil, Hercules had redeemed the tragic deaths of his family and earned a place in the divine pantheon. But his victory held an even deeper importance. In overcoming the chaotic and monstrous forces of the world, the hero swept away what remained of the Titans' primordial order, reshaping it into one where humanity could thrive. Through his labors, Hercules tamed the world's madness by atoning for his own.