

CANKER WORMS AND PUPPY LOVE
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We like to dismiss first encounters with love as juvenile, something we grow out of. We call it puppy love, but first loves are nonetheless real. Our seasons of love wear many faces. Most are reflected in the songs we enjoy.

I remember my first love like it was yesterday. I was waiting in line at the drinking fountain. She was ahead of me, taking her time. When I suggested she move, she turned and flicked water in my face ...and smiled. That's when my whole world changed. She walked away laughing, but I wasn't. I was noticing for the first time, the shape of a woman in motion. I went to visit her brother the next day, somehow forgetting he wasn't home. Coincidentally, she was. We talked outside, and she was cold, so I gave her my coat. My first damsel in distress. The first one to my knowledge I had ever impressed. I remember too, the first time she kissed me. Fireworks without a permit, but nothing compared to when she told me she loved me. I whispered back, "I love you too," and felt something of what it must mean to be a man. The words to songs I had been hearing for years, suddenly became significant to me. Words like, "You come on like a dream, peaches and cream Lips like strawberry wine You're sixteen, you're beautiful and you're mine "

That young lady taught me a lot about love. Another song was titled, "And They Call It Puppy Love", but it wasn't. It is as real to me now as it was then, and the years have dimmed none of my memories. For over a year, she was the sun my world revolved around, but time and place were our enemies. I left home young to go away to college, and she became afraid. I could not convince either her or myself the changes in my life would not exclude her. Angry words were spoken, never able to be recalled, and I lost her. I considered whether it was better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all. Music again gave me part of my answer. "What do you get when you fall in love? You only get lies and pain and sorrow. So for at least until tomorrow. I'll never fall in love again." It was a time of change; of trying to determine who we were really were and what relationships meant. That girl and I quickly learned that besides our attraction, our worlds had nothing in common. When she told me it would be best to just be friends, I agreed.

That was also about the time I began to drift from my commitment to God. I observed the difference between what was said and lived, both in church and in the game of love. Cynical and tired of disappointment, I isolated myself from chances to touch, chance to feel, or opportunity to love. I hated the cycle of hope born and pain felt when people bonded together in love, then were torn apart. No one came away whole. After feeling that hurt a few times, another song came to symbolize for me, the reality of love. "I learned the truth at seventeen that love was meant for beauty queens. ... The valentines I never knew, the Friday night charades of youth were spent on one more beautiful. ... Their small-town eyes will gape at you in dull surprise when payment due Exceeds accounts received, at seventeen. "

Canker worms are green or black inchworms that feed on many broad-leaved trees including oak, birch, elm, maple, and apple. When the worms are full grown, they hang from silk threads while transforming into moths. Females are wingless and crawl back onto the trees to lay eggs. This happens in a yearly cycle. Large numbers can strip trees, but the trees leaf out again during mid June. A prophet spoke of this recurring blight in **Joel 1:3-4**. These verses tell of systematic destruction of the green crops sustaining life. The danger lay in little things; small pests that build up in number till crops and other plants are overwhelmed and destroyed. Further in the chapter, we find hope. In **Joel 2:25**, we read, "I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you." Trees destroyed by canker worms can bud again in the summer.

Why do I mention canker worms along with puppy love? Because I remember my all first loves, even my first relationship with Jesus Christ. He took my breath away with His grace. I never dreamed He could be mine. It was an incredibly lopsided relationship when the Maker of heaven and earth, pure and powerful, looked at the shattered life I finally came to offer Him and said it was good enough. Those first few months were the stuff of dreams. I was loved, and my search for completion was over. I was not only significant to someone, but to the most powerful being in the universe. A song characterized that love. "I love you. I love you. I love you. What more can I say, but that I really love you. And I will try to live my life, so that it says it too. I love you. I love you. I really love you." I smiled a lot.

Then canker worms started gnawing. Worms like; friends I wanted to hang out doing things God would not join me in, events and entertainment I did not want to miss, girls I wanted to be with for a little while, books I wanted to read more than my Bible, rules I saw no reason to follow that just cramped my style, and so many others. They all just slowly gnawed away the joy from my love affair with God, till I went my separate ways. Does it hurt God when we forsake Him and forsake His love? The angel in **Revelation 2:4-5** warns of wrath when we leave our first love for God.

If worms have feasted so long we have forgotten God's love, and we want Him back, there are ways to accomplish that. If we are distant from an unchanging God, we were the ones who moved and must come back. Our heavenly lover is right where we left Him. How do we get Him back? He said He inhabits our worship. If true, we can entice God into our presence with our praises. According to **Psalms 100:4**, thanksgiving and praise is not necessarily what we bring into His presence, but it is how we get there. They are keys to enter into proximity with God.

We do not plan out the sweet nothings we whisper to those we love, but they help us draw close to each other. We can always whisper assurance of our love to God. It too will help us draw close. The relationship can blossom again. The worms can be dealt with and the purity of our first love can be restored. He would just die to hold us again.