

## **Psallo**

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***“Doesn’t the Greek word psallo inherently include musical instruments, since it means to pluck or strum something, such as a harp? Why are we limiting passages of scripture by arguing that Christians are only authorized to sing in worship?”***

One of the more common arguments in favor of instrumental music in worship is the use of the word *psallo* in Ephesians 5:19, translated in NASB as “making melody”. It literally means “psalming”. It is argued that the word inherently includes using musical instruments because it can be used to describe the process of plucking or strumming strings. So the argument goes something like this: “Ephesians 5:19 says I’m allowed to *psallo*, or pluck/strum, including strumming a guitar or plucking the strings of a ukulele. Therefore, instrumental music in worship is authorized.”

Without trying to get too technical, notice a few quotes from authorities on the language of the New Testament. “The original meaning was ‘pluck, play--in the LXX., frequently means sing whether to the accompaniment of a harp or (usually) not. The process continued until ‘*psallo*’ in modern Greek means ‘sing’ exclusively, with no reference to the instrumental accompaniment” (Arndt p. 891). Both Thayer and Vine note the same progression in both words. “In the N.T. to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praise of God in song” (Thayer p. 5). “Denotes in the N.T. to sing a hymn, sing praise” (Vine p. 58 'Melody'). What these definitions reveal is that the instrument was never inherent in this word. In fact, long before the term *psallo* was used in the context of plucking a musical instrument, it meant to pluck or pull anything, such as a hair, a bowstring, or a carpenter’s line. One must “supply” the instrument when using the word *psallo*. It does not inherently mean “play the guitar” but to “pluck or strum” whatever.

This is true even in the Old Testament when instrumental music in worship was authorized. Psalms 98:5 uses the phrase “Sing praises” – the Hebrew word here means striking with the fingers, to touch, yet the instrument must be supplied by the context, hence we find what follows, “with the harp”. The same is true in Psalm 71:22, 33:2, 144:9, and 149:3. Compare Ephesians 5:19 to Psalm 98:5. In both contexts an "instrument" is supplied to *psallo*. In the Psalm it is a harp, in Ephesians it is the heart. God specified the "instrument" to "touch, twang, pluck", that is, the human heart.

It must cause some consternation to proponents of instrumental music that not a single Bible translation ever provides even a hint of instrumental music in how it translates *psallo*. Translations uniformly follow the same pattern in their treatment of the word. Other uses include James 5:13, Romans 15:9, and 1

Corinthians 14:15 – every example is “singing”. Even Bible translators who might be inclined to use instrumental music in worship cannot find justification for translating the word *psallo* as “play a musical instrument.”

At some point in history, in a certain context, *psallo* could have been used to describe the plucking of stringed instruments. The argument that is based on outdated definitions, however, is flawed from the start. The word was used in many other contexts where something was plucked or strummed. So it makes about as much sense to say *psallo* inherently includes musical instruments as it does to say the word inherently includes pulling hair, a bowstring, or a carpenter’s line. Is anybody out there trying to argue that pulling your little sister’s hair during worship is authorized by Ephesians 5:19?