



The Word in the Flesh

When Instructions Aren't Enough

by Chris Tiegreen

It was my first time in Paris, and I was anxious to see something French. Like the Eiffel Tower, or the Arc de Triomphe. Or cheese. *Anything*.

But time was short. It was a one-night layover, certainly not long enough to absorb the City of Lights. I had to be selective—and quick. So I decided on the Arc de Triomphe and the Champs Élysées, hoping also to get a glimpse of the Eiffel Tower from afar. It was a good plan.

After clearing customs at Charles de Gaulle airport, I anxiously waited for the hotel shuttle. I stood right where the sign told me it would come. But it didn't, so I asked a taxi driver to take me to the hotel. *Non*, he said. It was too close to the airport. Not worth his time. He assured me, however, that the shuttle would come. Strike one with transportation, but my first conversation in French had gone reasonably well.

I did as instructed and waited. Twenty minutes, and still no van. All the other hotel vans passed, some of them two or three times. So I asked an airport transportation guy—he had an official vest on, so I figured he would know what he was talking about. With a pained expression for having to talk to a foreigner, he gestured to stay put. *Eet weel come*, he promised. So I waited some more.

Twenty more minutes passed. The Arc and the Avenue were waiting, and time was wasting. I went back inside the airport and asked someone at the information desk.

Oui, monsieur, la navette va arriver. Attendez à l'extérieur, she instructed. I don't understand

much, but I'd heard that before—"it will come, wait outside." But by then I had lost nearly an hour of my evening in Paris, and I told her so. She called the hotel, and, after talking with the desk clerk, calmly informed me that the shuttle for that hotel comes only by request. If only I had asked.

But I was not fazed. I checked into the hotel, which had information on its TV screen about a shuttle to the RER train station, which I would need to get to the Arc. But I was learning how instructions go—they aren't always easy to interpret. So when I got back down to the lobby, I double-checked with the shuttle driver himself, just to make sure he was going to the RER. *Pas moi*, he told me, but assured me another driver was coming along in five minutes.

It was more like fifteen, but that's OK. It got me to the station. And while Paris' public transportation is considered highly efficient, it was also rather complicated. But I was learning a few things; I knew not to rely only on the signs. So I asked, and was directed to the right platform.

There at Last

A half hour later, I emerged from the RER to the sounds and smells of central Paris. And when I turned around, there it was: the Arc de Triomphe.

I wandered around it, in awe of its enormity. I walked down the Champs Élysées, took a few pictures, and soaked in as much as I could. I found a café—it was touristy, but then I was a tourist... and hungry. So I sat there and ate some crepes and watched people walk by. Very French, and very cool. There was even some cheese.

It was getting late, so I headed back to the station and found the right line to my hotel. I had diligently studied the map, and I knew: find the blue signs and follow them to the right train.

No problem. As I arrived on the platform, a train pulled up. Perfect timing. I hopped on, sat down, and settled in for the long ride back to the hotel.

As I sat there staring at the ad posters, the people around me, and then the map overhead, I suddenly noticed an alarming fact. The blue line splits near the end. That was no problem coming into the city; the lines converged and ended up in the same place. But going back was another story. My train could turn left, where I wanted to go, or turn right, where I definitely didn't. And if I went the wrong way, I'd miss the last shuttle back to the hotel. For a guy with no taxi money left in his pocket and with no bank in Paris still open, that could pose somewhat of a problem.

I panicked, looking everywhere for some evidence that I was on the right blue train instead of the wrong blue train. There was none. The signs weren't enough, and the train was nearing the last station before the split. I needed help.

So I mustered up all the French that was in me and asked a guy across the aisle. With the obligatory pained French expression, he motioned to sit still. Then he went to the open door, looked out at the side of the train, came back and told me I was in the right place. I *merci'd* him not just once, but *beaucoup*.
A lot.

As the nice French guy got off at the next station, he handed me his newspaper and told me it might be helpful if I was going to be in Paris long—information about shows and exhibits and that sort of thing. There was no hint of that distaste for Americans I'd heard so much about. I thanked him again, and he left.

A Frustrating Parable

Then it occurred to me. My evening resembled life. We spend a lot of time studying the instructions and the signs—in our case, the Bible and sound biblical teaching—but we need more. The Word has always been exactly right—just like the shuttle sign at the airport, just like the TV screen in the hotel, and just like my map of the RER system. But it can be hard to decipher. We still need someone to talk to, someone to interpret the instructions, and someone to assure us we're in the right place. Or correct us when we're not.

For us, of course, that means Jesus. The Word became flesh, and boy am I glad. I love the instructions, but in life I need the personal. I need to be able to ask and to hear an answer. I need not just guidance, but a Guide.

Because when it comes down to it, even explicit instructions can be misread and misinterpreted. Sometimes we can end up in the wrong part of town without any money and no idea how to get home. And when that happens, I'd much rather have someone to turn to than have nothing to do but shrug my shoulders with resignation and lament, *c'est la vie*.