Through this *Minecraft* portal, Reporters Without Borders attempts to expose the younger generation to the value of a free press. “In the real world,” says Anna Nelson, the U.S. executive director of the group, “there are very real consequences when information is censored.” Reporters Without Borders wants game users, some as young as 7 years old, to understand how important it is to have access to the truth. Since its launch in March 2020, the project boasts reaching more than 20 million gamers in 165 countries.

**God’s Uncensored Library.** *Minecraft* reminds us that we should never censor journalism. And the same could be said for religion. The book of Nehemiah makes clear that people of faith also need access to the Truth. The citizens of Judah lived in exile in Babylon for 70 years, cut off from their homeland and worship in the Jerusalem temple. They had little access to the news of Judah and lived as strangers in a foreign land.

Finally allowed to return home, Nehemiah led the people in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, while the priest Ezra read from Scripture as the people listened. For them, the Truth came not through a backdoor in *Minecraft*, but through the Water Gate in the walls of Jerusalem. The Word of God really mattered to the people, which is why they gathered and “Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding” (8:1-2).

The book of the law of Moses was their uncensored library. The people craved the Truth that came through Scripture, so they asked Ezra to read the Word that God had given to Israel. “[Ezra] read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law” (v. 3).

Ezra stood on a wooden platform and read the law, and the reading turned into a worship service that lasted six hours. “Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up…Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord” (vv. 5-6). The people hung on every word as Ezra translated and interpreted the Hebrew text into the more familiar Aramaic. We, like them, are enriched by access to the uncensored Word of God, especially when it was made clear through teaching.

Ezra and Nehemiah “helped the people to understand the law…[as] they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law” (vv. 7-9). When the people grasped what they were hearing, they were so moved that they cried. In ancient times and today, the Word of God has the power to penetrate the human spirit, to speak to the heart, to touch the deepest corners of the soul.

Think of the biblical passages that still affect us today: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1); “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 29:11); “Do justice … love kindness … walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8); “Love is patient; love is kind” (1 Corinthians 13:4); “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13); “All things work together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28); “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). These words really matter.

These are words that touch our spirits, hearts, and souls. All come from God’s uncensored library. The people of Jerusalem gathered beneath a wooden platform and listened to the law of God being read. They knew that to “understand” the Bible means, quite literally, to “stand under” it; to place ourselves under its authority; to allow our lives to be shaped by it; and to give it our trust and our confidence. When understand the Bible, we are doing more than simply understanding the words; we are “standing under” Scripture’s view of God and humanity and history, giving it the insight of our brains and the allegiance of our hearts.

As the people of Jerusalem stood under the law of God, they allowed the words of Moses to shape them as a people. We do not know the exact words that Ezra read, but they might have been the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), or the challenge to “love the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6:5), or the directive to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Whatever portion of God’s Truth Ezra delivered to them, the people “were attentive to the word of the law” (Nehemiah 8:3). They answered, “Amen, Amen!” (v. 6), pledging their allegiance to the words and to the God who spoke them. That same challenge remains for us when we read from God’s uncensored library.

There is nothing fake about power of the Word of God or its power to refresh our souls and guide our steps. It is no lie that we understand Scripture best when we “stand under” God’s Word and allow it to mold our hearts, souls, and minds. When the Word is read and interpreted, we share the experience of the people of Judah, who wept and rejoiced “because they had understood the words that were declared to them” (v. 12). In every time and place, the uncensored Word of God is our truth, and the joy of the Lord is our strength (v. 10).

Prayer: God of Truth, thank You for the courage of Nehemiah, who purposed in his heart to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem for Your praise and glory, and refused to be intimidated by those who despise Your name. Thank You for the witness of Ezra the scribe, whom You used to reignite the moral and spiritual fire in the hearts of Israel during this difficult time in their history. Lord, we pray that we might be filled with the same courage and dedication as these two extraordinary servants. Kindle the flame of Truth in the heart of all Your people. May Your perfect will be done in the lives of all Your people, and we pray that our lives may be a living sacrifice that honors Your name. This we ask in Jesus' name, AMEN.

**Sources:**

* Brinton, Henry G. *The Bible’s Greatest Hits: Top Sixty-Six Passages from Genesis to Revelation*(Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2021), 23, 46-48.
* Peters, Adele. “Reporters Without Borders built a virtual library in ‘Minecraft’ to share banned journalism.” *Fast Company*, May 4, 2021, www.fastcompany.com.

**Uncensored Libraries**

Sunday, January 16, 2022 [Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Nehemiah+8%3a1-3%2c+5-6%2c+8-10&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

It is not easy being a journalist these days. Journalists face criticism from both the right and the left. People accuse journalists of sensationalism and bias. We pin the label “fake news” on stories we do not like. It is difficult to know the truth because world events look very different depending on who is doing the reporting*.* Some folks are taking this very personally. A T-shirt is now available that says: “My 60th Birthday is FAKE NEWS.”

We are lucky to have a free press, even if we do not always agree with it. The First Amendment of our Constitution says that Congress shall make no law “abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” Whether you like the news or not, our American press is free, uncensored, and available to everyone. This is not so in some countries, where the government tightly controls the media and bans news sites, forcing people to find alternative access to uncensored journalism.

Surprisingly, one such gateway for news is through the game *Minecraft.* Yes, really! *Minecraft*is an online video game in which players explore a virtual world, extract raw materials, make tools, and build structures. Players can choose to play in survival mode, acquiring resources to build new worlds; or they can play in creative mode with unlimited access to building resources.

Or you can access uncensored journalism. The nonprofit Reporters Without Borders created a backdoor within the game through which users can visit a virtual library stocked with uncensored articles from journalists worldwide. Visitors to *The Uncensored Library* can read reports from the slain journalist Jamal Khashoggi, whose articles would be difficult to find on Saudi Arabia’s censored internet. Readers can also access articles from Javier Valdez, a Mexican journalist who exposed crime and corruption until he was killed by gunmen. This uncensored news is accessible to any player, anytime, anywhere.