



Ida B. Wells

# Ida B. Wells

by Victoria Johnson

*“The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.”*

Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a fearless anti-lynching crusader, suffragist, women’s rights advocate, journalist, and speaker. Wherever she saw injustice against African Americans, she worked to set it right.

Ida’s mother was a deeply religious woman who was concerned about the dignity of people of color. She instilled biblical principles in Ida, who on Sundays was only permitted to study the Bible. It was a book Ida read repeatedly throughout her life.

Ida was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862, the eldest of eight children. Her father served on the board of Rust College, which was started for freed black students. Ida took classes there with her mother, who came along to learn to read and write.

When Ida was only 16, a yellow fever epidemic swept through Holly Springs and killed her parents and youngest brother. Ida provided for her five sisters and secured a job teaching for \$25 a month. After a year, she moved with the two youngest sisters to Memphis to teach for a higher salary and live with her aunt, while her other siblings stayed behind with relatives.

In Tennessee, Ida started her first civil rights campaign. In 1884, a railroad conductor asked Ida to give up her seat on the train to a white man and ordered her into the segregated “Jim Crow” car, which was already crowded with passengers. Ida resisted and was forcefully removed from the train as the white passengers applauded. When she returned to Memphis, she sued the railroad and wrote about her struggle in *The Living Way*, a local church paper. She won her case in circuit court, but the railroad appealed to the Tennessee Supreme Court, which reversed the decision. After the court loss, she wrote in her diary that if it were possible, she “would gather my race in my arms and fly away with them. Oh God, is there no redress, no peace, and no justice in this land for us? Come to my aid at this moment and teach me what to do, for I am sorely, bitterly disappointed. Show us the way.”

Ida started writing for local papers about the poor conditions in Memphis schools where she was teaching. Her contract was not renewed. The Rev. R. Nightingale invited Wells to become a partner in the *Free Speech and Headlight*, an anti-segregationist newspaper.

A turning point came for Ida in 1892 when a mob attacked three young, black Memphis grocery store owners to stop them from competing with white businesses. Shots were fired, killing three white men. The three black men were jailed for trial, but a mob broke into the jail and lynched them. When Ida wrote a story against the lynching, a mob destroyed her newspaper office and warned her not to stay in Memphis. She angrily called on black citizens to boycott white businesses or leave Memphis—and many did.

She moved to New York to write for the *New York Age* while gathering evidence from newspaper reports throughout the country that showed white mobs were regularly lynching black men, accusing them of rape but rarely proving that crime. In

the previous 10 years alone, she discovered, 728 black men and women had been lynched in the United States, many without charges or a trial. Her thorough research resulted in the publication of “Southern Horrors: Lynch Laws in All Its Phases,” which brought her national and international attention.

Ida lashed out at anyone who did not vigorously protest injustices to African Americans. She highly criticized Booker T. Washington as being too accommodating of segregation and voting discrimination. When a black postmaster was lynched, she went with a Congressional delegation to President William McKinley, urging him to sponsor federal legislation against lynching.

She also challenged evangelist D.L. Moody for continuing to speak to segregated audiences and refusing to condemn racial injustices. She spoke at several church denominational meetings around the country, urging them to condemn segregation and lynching, but none did. She wrote, “Where were all the legal and civil authorities of the country, to say nothing of the Christian churches, that they permitted such things to be? I could only say that despite the axiom that there is a remedy for every wrong, everybody in authority from the President of the United States down, had declared their inability to do anything; and that the Christian bodies and moral associations do not touch the question.”

In 1893 Ida moved to Chicago, and with Jane Addams she successfully blocked the establishment of segregated schools in Chicago. Also in Chicago, she helped start the Negro Fellowship League when the Sunday school class she was teaching discussed a lynching in Springfield, Illinois. She encouraged the class to do something, so they began providing lodging and employment opportunities for black men who had moved north.

In 1895, Ida married F.L. Barnett, a journalist and lawyer from Chicago and owner of the city’s major black newspaper. They had four children. Ida arranged for her children to be cared for so she could go on speaking engagements or she took them with her. She firmly believed in the dignity of working mothers.

In 1906, she joined with W.E.B. DuBois and others to help found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and she also worked with the women’s suffrage movement. During the 1913 march of 5,000 women for universal suffrage in Washington, D.C., the white Illinois marchers asked her to march in the rear with the other black women. Ida refused and walked up front.

All her life, Ida reported on discrimination, lynching, and race riots around the country. In 1922, she went to Arkansas to interview 12 black farmers wrongly charged with starting a riot. She prayed with them and said, “The God you serve is the God of Paul and Silas who opened the prison gates, and if you have all the faith you say you have, you ought to believe He will open your doors too.” In 1930, disgusted with the nominees of the major parties who were running for the Illinois Senate—they had no plans to help blacks in the Great Depression—she ran as an Independent. A year later, she passed away suddenly at the age of 69, sadly never seeing the completion of her crusade to bring the light of truth to the world.



Thank you for downloading this digital product from David C Cook! We hope you and your ministry benefit from this content, and we encourage you to share it with others.

All David C Cook digital product is protected by copyright laws and is intended for non-commercial use only.

All rights reserved. Except for brief excerpts for review purposes, no part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form without written permission from the publisher.

The graphic circle C logo is a registered trademark of David C Cook.

Your use is subject to the End User License Agreement (“EULA”) and any additional terms or restrictions that may accompany the product. Digital products cannot be returned, sold, or relicensed.

Read the full text of the David C Cook End User License Agreement at: <https://davidccook.org/eula/>

If you have any concerns or questions, please contact us at: <http://davidccook.org/contact/>

Thank You!